

Burning Man: Transforming Community through Countercultural Ritual
Process

Jessica McCaffrey

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By: Jessica McCaffrey

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Signed by the final Examining Committee:

Dr. Katja Neves Chair

Dr. David Howes Examiner

Dr. Christine Jourdan Examiner

Dr. Mark Watson Supervisor

Approved by _____
Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

September 12th 2012

Dean of Faculty

ABSTRACT

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Jessica McCaffrey

This thesis will examine the countercultural event called Burning Man through the lens of the ritual process. Through the personal narratives of six main collaborators as well as my own ritual journey, I will outline how participation in countercultural social networks and events may lead to the creation of alternative moral practices which ultimately fuel the creation of communities. These communities do not organize according to conventional definitions of community and are often spontaneous and temporary. These spaces have been called Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ). TAZs allow participants to re-imagine and re-invent the rules for collective belonging and re-constitute what community is and how it is experienced. Many of my collaborators have stressed how important their Burning Man experience has been to the development of alternative moral practices. Burning Man, as an axis mundi of countercultural production and reproduction, can therefore be viewed as a pilgrimage which teaches initiates how to embrace countercultural moral practices in everyday life, these practices are embedded in new social movements whose aims are to revitalize cultural values through the lifeworlds of participants.

Dedication

In loving memory of Larry Andrews; my father and so often my hero.

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Figure 1: The Man effigy. Photograph by author.

Introduction

My thesis will explore the countercultural event known as Burning Man through the stories of Montreal participants. Burning Man is arguably the “freak epicentre” (St John 2009b:52) of North America’s countercultural artistic movements; since its inception in 1986, it has grown from a few dozen friends sitting around a fire in a San Francisco nature reserve, to over fifty-thousand people converging in the middle of Black Rock Desert, Nevada to build a temporary city, live in it for a week, and then pack up leaving without a trace. During the festival the city is a topsy-turvy Wonderland of artistic projects and performances which clearly invert the norms of everyday life.

Burning Man has been described by both participants (hereafter Burners¹) and scholars as a ritual process (Gilmore 2005 and 2008, Hockett 2004, St John 2008). It is one contemporary countercultural ritual where the latent aspects of everyday life can be performed, contested, re-imagined, or reaffirmed in extraordinary ways. Much of the research on Burning Man has focused on liminal experiences and *communitas* during the festival. Liminality, or the redressive phase of the ritual process, is marked by “the release from mundane structures, the movement [...] from center to periphery, participant ordeals, [and] a homogenization of status” (St John 2008). During this phase a sense of *communitas* is fostered. *Communitas* “is a meeting point, or interface between individuals in a direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities. It is a brief moment of deep human connection, a spontaneous event, a flash of unity” (Hockett 2004:198).

The ritual process, as the anthropologist Victor Turner famously described, includes three phases: separation, liminality, and reaggregation (Turner 1969). I have decided to examine Burning Man using these three categories of experience. In doing so, I am following the work of several previous researchers (Gilmore 2005b and 2008, Hockett 2004, St. John 2009). However, what makes my approach distinct is the focus I draw to the ‘before and after’ of the ritual itself; that is the phases of separation and reaggregation. My primary concern is with how the Burning Man experience interacts with participants lives in Montreal. As Burning Man has been described to me as “a spiritual experience” and an “awakening” I would like to know what happens after the festival considering so many participants feel their lives are profoundly changed by the

¹ A “Burner” is someone who has attended Burning Man.

experience. Also, I would like to ask how do individuals begin this ritual process in the first place? Where does it start?

Personal narratives provide an interesting way to explore the ritual process as they allow the researcher greater insight into the personal and particular trajectories of collaborators. “[The] everyday lifeworld is a world of discourse, language games, and communicative activity. In Habermas’s conception of the lifeworld, narrative plays a singularly important role, for narrative makes it possible for people to create coherent scenarios which articulate *shared* meanings” (Jackson 1996:38). Since the ritual process is thought to move through three stages, narratives are one method for following the *process* of ritual experience beyond the limits of the festival and into participant’s everyday life. My thesis is therefore centered on the Burning Man narratives of my collaborators in Montreal.

The interviews I have conducted with collaborators have highlighted the ritual process as part of a larger trend in countercultural practices concerned with the reenactment and recreation of temporary autonomous zones, or TAZ (Bey 1985).

Bey advocates something that he calls ‘immediatism’, indicating an ‘antagonism to all forms of mediated, passivity-inducing leisure and culture’ and a ‘festal culture’ based on hedonistic spirituality and tribalism working against the familial arrangements of conventional society. [...] The TAZ is an advance glimpse of utopia,... a microcosm of that ‘anarchist dream’ of a free culture, but its success depends on its impermanence

(Fortunati 2005:154).

Many (but not all) of my collaborators have indicated that before and after their Burning Man experience(s) they have participated in satellite and sister events which promote similar immediate and participatory experiences. Burning Man certainly takes on the appearance of a ritual process, however, this ritual is not one which socializes individuals into the dominant sociocultural paradigm. Rather, through the ten principles of Burning Man (which I will list below), the event inspires participants to bring the language and values of Burning Man into everyday life. In this sense the ritual process feeds countercultural moral practices inspired by TAZs and fosters a sense of community among participants.

A Brief History of Burning Man

Burning Man began as a small celebration among friends at Bakers Beach in San Francisco in 1986. Mark Collins attended Burning Man for the first few years. I met him during my fieldwork in San Francisco at Specs, a historic bohemian/beatnik bar located in North Beach San Francisco. He remembers his girlfriend showing up at his home in the Bay Area on her motorcycle, telling him that people were heading down to the beach to “burn a scarecrow”². With nothing else to do he agreed to join her and they spent the night on the beach watching an eight foot tall wooden effigy burn and celebrated with some friends. At that time the event was an informal affair without tickets, infrastructure, or reputation. It was organized by a group of friends including Larry Harvey (the recognized founder of Burning Man today), and John Law (a member of the San

² Participant observation notes from Specs: San Francisco, California. August 28th 2010.

Francisco Cacophony Society³), two of the more notorious creators of the event (Hockett 2004). By 1990 the event had grown from approximately twenty people to around eight hundred people and it was too large and visible to remain on Bakers Beach. When authorities arrived at the beach and stopped participants from burning their now iconic effigy, a core group drove to Nevada's Black Rock Desert to consummate the interrupted ritual.

The idea to go to Black Rock Desert came from members of San Francisco's Cacophony Society who had been active at previous "burns". (The term "burn" reflects participating at a Burning Man event and more specifically witnessing the burning of the effigy). Black Rock City, the name given to the physical location of Burning Man during the week-long event in Black Rock Desert, was born out of these circumstances. Black Rock City is a temporary city situated in "the playa", a name which is commonly given to dried-up lake beds in the Southern United States and Mexico, which much of Black Rock Desert is. With a dusty and alkali surface, at an elevation of almost 4000 feet, little vegetation or wildlife, and sporadic dust storms, the Playa is a vast and surreal environment perfectly conducive to Burning Man as a place "betwixt and between" (Gilmore 2005:44).

³ The Cacophony society is a group of prankster-artists and culture-jammers who are involved in an "underground culture of doing guerrilla events" (Larry Harvey quoted in Hockett 2004:9).

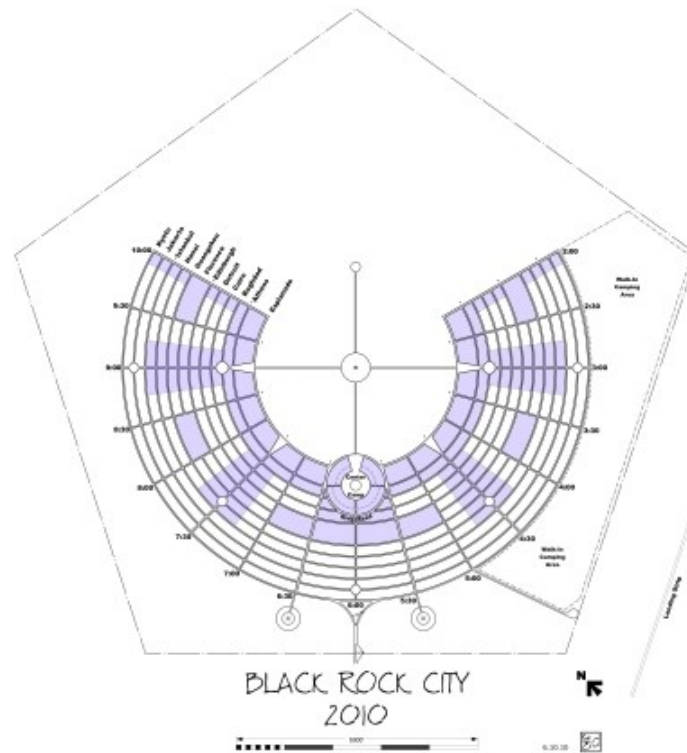


Figure 2: Map of Black Rock City 2010. Burning Man website⁴

From 1986 to 1996 Burning Man grew from 20 participants to 8,000. Ten years later that number had quadrupled to over 38,000 and the event continues to grow to this day with over 51,000 participants at the 2010 event. “The man”, the wooden effigy in the shape of a stick man, has also grown with the festival. In 1986 the man stood at 8 feet, in 2008 the man was “40 feet standing on a 50 foot tall obelisk (the tallest man to date).”⁵ The city is arranged in a circle with The man at the center of the open playa. The open Playa has no camps or roads; it is an open circular expanse of land with a diameter of approximately 1.2 kilometers. Roads leading in to and out of the center follow the hours on a clock. The roads going around this central circle start with Esplanade at the

⁴ http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/2010/10_brc_map.html. Accessed April 20th 2011.

⁵ http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/bm_timeline.html. Accessed April 20th 2011.

innermost circle and then moving outwards alphabetically, A, B, C, etcetera, are named according to the theme of the year. (When I attended Burning Man in 2010 the theme was Metropolis. Thus, after Esplanade the streets were named after world cities; Athens to Kyoto officially, although I heard that London and Mumbai were added later in the week as the population of Black Rock City continued to grow during the event). The festival has also seen an increase in organization and infrastructure. As a temporary city Burning Man has roads and addresses (Athens and 4:30, for example), it has a DMV (Department of Mutant Vehicles) which licenses “art cars” to drive on Burning Man grounds. (Any motorized vehicle on the playa must be artistically altered, they are required to drive at a maximum of 5 miles per hour, and they must be registered with the DMV).



Figure 3: Art car on the Playa. Photograph by author.

There are the Black Rock Rangers who are the official mediators at Black Rock City patrolling the event grounds and making sure safety regulations are observed. There is also the DPW (Department of Public Works) who sets up the main infrastructure of the festival which includes the roads, the man, and center camp (a large central location where many people congregate during the festival to see shows, fill out the census, or

drink coffee). These are just some of the organizations at Burning Man and all of them are volunteer-based. Black Rock City exists because of the investment of time and resources of its participants (Chen 2005:110). Organizations have emerged organically as the “citizens” of Black Rock City have continuously identified problems with Burning Man and come up with solutions to them (for example, Recycle Camp). This means that participants who pay for tickets at the door are also the people who pay for, transport, construct, and operate their respective camps which range from massive party camps to the post office, or the DMV, and ultimately create Burning Man’s temporary city.



Figure 4: Inside Center Camp. Photograph by author.

Today Burning Man, or Black Rock City, is a thriving large-scale artistic community. The large majority of festival attendees are white, middle-class, North Americans.⁶ Nearly eighty percent of participants considered themselves not to be persons of color (13% did consider themselves persons of color, and 13% considered

⁶ This information is made available on the Burning Man website through their census statistics. Only a small portion of Burning Man participants fill out the census, therefore the statistics are approximations at best (however my own participant observation at Burning Man 2010 has indicated similar trends). The statistics above come from the 2010 census report which is the most current census published on the Burning Man website.

themselves persons of color only sometimes). The majority of people who answered the census had somewhere between 13-20 years of education, and had an annual income ranging between 10, 000\$ and 80, 000\$. The cost of the festival is fairly steep: tickets range between 200\$ and 350\$. Transportation which frequently includes airplane tickets and a significant amount of driving can be in the thousands, and most importantly supplies to live for a week in the desert.



Figure 5: Large scale sculpture on the Playa. Photograph by author.

While the majority of burners come from the United States, there is a significant and growing international presence at Burning Man. In my camp (of just over 200 people) at the 2010 event there were participants from Ireland, England, South Africa, Australia, Japan, Canada, and Germany. Burning Man also has a growing regional network with burners organizing all over the world in a “Burner Diaspora”⁷ including Japan, China, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Spain, Italy, South Africa, and

⁷ http://regionals.burningman.com/regionals_history.html. Accessed April 20th 2011.

virtually all over Canada and the United States, including Hawaii and Alaska⁸. (The regional Burning Man group in Montreal will be the focus of Chapter 6 where I will describe in more detail what regional groups do.)

Burning Man positions itself morally and socially as a countercultural phenomenon. Burning Man founder Larry Harvey, in several interviews and lecture texts, argues that “[the] mass culture of modern American society is passive, anonymous, isolating, alienating, and materially wasteful” (Fortunati 2005: 153). These values have also infiltrated the art world, and Burning Man is a response to this modern American mass culture. There are ten core principles which reflect Burning Man’s philosophy on social organization and interaction at the event. The ten principles are defined on the Burning Man website as follows:

Radical Inclusion:

Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger.
No prerequisites exist for participation in our community.

Gifting:

Burning Man is devoted to acts of gift giving. The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value.

Decommodification:

In order to preserve the spirit of gifting, our community seeks to create social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions,

⁸ According to the Burning Man website Manitoba, Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and the three Canadian territories are without a regional group. In the United States only five states do not have regional groups: North Dakota, Wyoming, Mississippi, West Virginia, and Maryland. http://regionals.burningman.com/na_index.html. Accessed April 20th, 2011.

or advertising. We stand ready to protect our culture from such exploitation. We resist the substitution of consumption for participatory experience.

Radical Self-reliance:

Burning Man encourages the individual to discover, exercise and rely on his or her inner resources.

Radical Self-expression:

Radical self-expression arises from the unique gifts of the individual. No one other than the individual or a collaborating group can determine its content. It is offered as a gift to others. In this spirit, the giver should respect the rights and liberties of the recipient.

Communal Effort:

Our community values creative cooperation and collaboration. We strive to produce, promote and protect social networks, public spaces, works of art, and methods of communication that support such interaction.

Civic Responsibility:

We value civil society. Community members who organize events should assume responsibility for public welfare and endeavor to communicate civic responsibilities to participants. They must also assume responsibility for conducting events in accordance with local, state and federal laws.

Leaving No Trace:

Our community respects the environment. We are committed to leaving no physical trace of our activities wherever we gather. We clean up after ourselves and endeavor, whenever possible, to leave such places in a better state than when we found them.

Participation:

Our community is committed to a radically participatory ethic. We believe that transformative change, whether in the individual or in society, can occur

only through the medium of deeply personal participation. We achieve being through doing. Everyone is invited to work. Everyone is invited to play. We make the world real through actions that open the heart.

Immediacy:

Immediate experience is, in many ways, the most important touchstone of value in our culture. We seek to overcome barriers that stand between us and a recognition of our inner selves, the reality of those around us, participation in society, and contact with a natural world exceeding human powers. No idea can substitute for this experience.⁹

These 10 Principles inform the moral practices of my collaborators throughout their ritual journey and are central to kind of community fostered through Burning Man. They are important to keep in mind as I construct my argument in the following chapters. Chapter 1 will review some of the literature already available on Burning Man as well as introduce some of the theoretical directions I would like to take in my thesis. Chapter 2 will briefly describe my research methods and introduce you to my six main collaborators.

In Chapter 3 we will begin with the first phase of the ritual process, separation. This will require an examination of the social and cultural contexts that my collaborators found themselves in leading up to their departure to Burning Man. It will trace the connections between raves, music festival, and artistic communities which allow for the knowledge of Burning Man to be shared. Chapter 4 will take us through the liminal phase of the ritual process at Burning Man. Encounters with the carnivalesque in a participation driven environment makes Burning Man emerge as a training ground of alternative moral

⁹ http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/principles.html. Accessed June 15th, 2012.

practices. Chapter 5 will examine the final phase of the ritual process; reaggregation. In this phase many of my collaborators experience personal and social transformations through their involvement with Burning Man. They return to their everyday lives and attempt to create meaningful communities of practice around the ideals and values embraced at Burning Man. Finally, Chapter 6 will argue that these communities are impermanent and constitute a new configuration of collective identity. Furthermore, these communities move into the realm of new social movements as their alternative aesthetics attempt to challenge and change cultural life.

1. Research in Wonderland

Burning Man has recently become a popular site for conducting social research. In the past ten years a dozen graduate theses have been written on Burning Man in subjects including sociology (Chen 2004), cultural anthropology (Ben-Yehuda 2007, Bowditch 2007), American studies (Hockett 2004), communications (Stewart 2010), performance studies and theatre (White 2001, Clupper 2007), and religion (Rossin 2001, Stevens 2003, Gilmore 2005a), indicating a growing academic interest in the Burning Man phenomenon. Several of these authors contributed to a 2005 collection of essays on Burning Man entitled *AfterBurn: Reflection on Burning Man* edited by Lee Gilmore and Mark Van Proyen. And in the last two years three of these authors have published books on Burning Man: *Enabling Creative Chaos: The Organization behind the Burning Man Event* (Chen 2009), *On the Edge of Utopia* (Bowditch 2010), and *Theatre in a Crowded Fire: Ritual and Spirituality at Burning Man* (Gilmore 2010). I will begin by reviewing some of the literature on Burning Man. A common theme which can be found in all the following studies is the emphasis on moral practices; that is, they all highlight aspects of the aesthetic lifestyle which differentiates experiences at Burning Man from everyday experiences.

In her 2005 article, “Incendiary Incentives: How the Burning Man Organization Motivates and Manages Volunteers”, Katherine Chen examines how volunteers at Burning Man are managed by the organization by comparing how the organizational strategies of Burning Man coordinators differ from those of conventional employers and organizations.¹⁰ According to Chen, participants often decide to volunteer at Burning Man because of the social and cooperative opportunities which the experience affords

¹⁰ The Burning Man organization is formally known as Black Rock City Limited Liability Corporation.

them. Volunteers are encouraged to pool their resources and their talents to accomplish their tasks; this often means that volunteers get the opportunity to work with individuals from different backgrounds and with different life experiences. For many volunteers this has resulted in a more highly valued norm of sociability than they have found in the workplace, and is a central motivating factor to their continued volunteer involvement with the Burning Man organization (Chen 2005:112). Many volunteers also cited that the hands on and creative components to volunteer activities offered them a sense of immediate reward and direct interaction with real people that they did not get at their workplace. Thus Chen notes, volunteers “can relate their individual contributions to a larger community context” (2005:117). As an organizational environment, experimentation is encouraged over standardization, and this too motivates volunteers to become involved because their ideas are given more weight.

Burning Man organizers also use several tactics in their management of volunteers to encourage their continued participation. One tactic is to over-recruit volunteers for events. If the Black Rock Cafe requires three employees for every shift, they make sure to have scheduled ten for every shift. Many volunteers who sign up for projects (often through emails) never end up making their commitment. Burning Man is an unpredictable festival; time is hard to keep track of and any number of last minute occurrences could distract a volunteer. Another way organizers encourage volunteers is by having fun work environments. Music, costumes, and decorations all add to the appeal for volunteers. Some groups like the lamplighters, who are responsible for lighting the city’s lamps every night, provide costumes and a camp site for their volunteers thereby “meeting people’s desire for a community home and an identity within the larger event”

(Chen 2005:122). Chen concludes that the Burning Man organization has done a good job of balancing organizational needs and volunteer expectations. Further, the Burning Man volunteer experience provides a “tool kit” of organization strategies for volunteers to carry with them beyond the event.

In “Utopia, Social Sculpture, and Burning Man” (2005), Allegra Fortunati explores the role of Burning Man’s utopian vision through three theorists; Karl Mannheim, Thomas More, and Joseph Beuys. For Mannheim, a utopian mentality differs from wishful thinking; while both are dissatisfied with current realities only the utopian mentality poses a threat to the status quo by articulating the political aims of a group. There are four ideal-types which inform Mannheim’s concept of the utopian mind and they reflect class. The “orgiastic chiasm of the Anabaptist” (Fortunati 2005:153) is the first of these ideal types. The chiasm is characterized by a spiritualized politics; “absolute presentness”, intense emotionality and sensuality (Fortunati 2005:154). Burning Man reflects this ideal type through the participants who spend their time at raves while at the event, and participants who follow the works and ideas of the anarchist political philosopher Hakim Bey¹¹ (Fortunati 2005:154). Burning Man hosts a huge number of raves in different camps throughout the weeklong event. According to Bey, rave attendees reproduce the ideal type of the chiasm because their chaotic immediatism puts them in direct antagonism with mass (passive) culture. Rave attendees often undergo sleep deprivation and fasting along with the consumption of hallucinogenic drugs and dancing for long hours to repetitive music to achieve this immediatism.

¹¹ The relationship between Burning Man and Hakim Bey’s work is intertwined and will be discussed later in this chapter.

The second ideal type in Mannheim's utopian mentality is the liberal humanitarian. This ideal type is not antagonistic to the status quo; it is accepting of the cultural climate and seeks to add an ethical character to interactions. Burning Man achieves this ideal type through its principles which encourage a common culture (Fortunati 2005:156). The principles of civic responsibility and radical self-reliance advocate an environment of accountability within the chaotic framework already established. The third ideal type is a conservative element. This is the least reflected ideal-type at Burning Man but is nonetheless visible in the Burning Man organization's interactions with the Bureau of Land Management. Similarly, Fortunati argues that the yearly themes for the festival are conservative in their lack of history and centralizing function. Finally, Mannheim's fourth ideal-type is "the socialist-communist utopia" which envisions a utopia arriving after the breakdown of capitalist culture. Fortunati sees this exemplified in the principle of gifting at Burning Man.

The physical arrangement of Burning Man, its crescent moon shape, also recalls Thomas More's description of utopia as a "crescent-shaped island" (Fortunati 2005:160). He imagined that the physical design of cities would encourage higher norms of sociability and community effort. However, as Fortunati notes, More might find Black Rock City more of a dystopia than a utopia because of its isolated and harsh physical environment. Lastly, Fortunati argues that the emphasis on art and artists at Burning Man recalls Beuys' position on creativity. Beuys "viewed human creativity and capacity as being the real capital in society" (Fortunati 2005:165). Burning Man makes use of this capacity by encouraging and facilitating everyone to be a participant, and inasmuch, an artist.

Marc Van Proyen's "Tale of Two Surrealities" (2005) uses Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of "desiring machines" and the "theatres of legitimization" which fuel them to explain the difference between surrealism at The San Francisco International Art Exposition (the Art Expo) and surrealism at Burning Man. Van Proyen refers to André Breton's definition of surrealism as an idea which privileges the forms found in dreams; forgotten associations and strange, half-conscious thoughts. In dreams the limits to form are removed and unexpected elements blend. According to Breton's conceptualization surrealism "tends to ruin once and for all other psychic mechanisms, and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principle problems of life" (Van Proyen 2005:174). At the Art Expo the infrastructure - displays, advertising endorsements - all run counter to the basic tenets of surrealism. Van Proyen describes how the art is displayed in restrictive white cubes arranged in neat lines above grey carpets, while crowds of mostly detached tourists peer at the art curiously. Theatres of legitimization choreograph a seamless flow of goods and values; the infrastructure presupposes the product. Thus Van Proyen explains that "the art in the Art Expo can only be understood as having meaning because it's in the Art Expo" (2005:176). The Art Expo is a small part of a much larger desiring machine, and it is a theatre of legitimization where the avant-garde is co-opted and repackaged for capitalist consumption. As Van Proyen notes, surrealism stems from discontent with the status quo: "Surrealism was first and foremost a mythopoetic art movement that was militantly opposed to the complacent lie of so-called normalcy" (2005:177).

He goes on to argue that Burning Man is one of the last refuges where surrealism is practiced and celebrated in surrealist style, away from the grinding corporatism and

consumerism of the desiring machine with its predetermined forms. So what makes Burning Man authentically surreal for Van Proyen? First of all the Black Rock desert provides an ideal landscape; a blank and eerily isolated canvas for the creation of a surreal temporary city. Second, most of the art is made by amateurs; people who make art for *fun*, out of love for the art itself. The sculptures, theatre, and installations are committed to the absurd and the eccentric. Furthermore, art at Burning Man is interactive; it is engaged with by participants in a myriad of ways. Third, participants camp together and adopt silly behaviours characteristic of their theme camp. They are part of a “camp aesthetic” or “camp taste” which, according to Susan Sontag,

“is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of “character”... Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as “a camp,” they’re enjoying it. Camp is a tender feeling.” (Van Proyen 2005:179).

Van Proyen concludes that the art at Burning Man is surrealist because it eroticizes intelligence whereas the Art Expo intellectualizes the erotic (2005:189). Fire plays a key erotic ritual role at Burning Man, as many of the works of art are burned in the closing days of the event. It is a form of sacrifice and inasmuch it is “the anti-thesis of production” (Van Proyen 2005:189). Surrealism at Burning Man therefore not only evades but inverts the desiring machine and theatres of legitimization and thus maintains its surrealist integrity.

Jeremy Hockett’s article “Participant Observation and the Study of Self: Burning Man as Ethnographic Experience” (2005) examines how the mainstream media

repackages our perception of the countercultural other using tactics of “temporal distancing”. For example “hippies” and “freaks” are often viewed as people choosing a one-dimensional “drop-out” lifestyle by the mainstream media. Similarly, Burning Man is perceived as a big party where all seriousness is gone and therefore it is “not *really* real” (Hockett 2005:69). Hockett argues that the mainstream media’s representation of Burning Man and the counterculture other is similar to how classic ethnographies once portrayed the other; timeless and flat. These representations tend to disarm the vibrancy and cultural potential of the event by rendering it static. Conversely, if we look at what many participants actually say about the event, those who have experienced this counterculture, Burning Man is a reflexive ethnographic experience. This is because countercultural forms are enacted at the event, and the event itself becomes a performative mode of communication. Participants perform alternate versions of reality, so these are not “unreal” to the participant. Nevertheless, the mainstream representation of counterculture outside of Burning Man states that they are. This forces participants to be reflexive about their experiences at Burning Man and therefore to engage critically with their own culture. Thus, Hockett asserts that countercultural ritual spaces are important for cultural change as these spaces allow for the re-imagining of culture through performance.

Lee Gilmore uses Victor Turner’s ideas on rites of passage to explore Burning Man as a ritual journey and pilgrimage in “Fires of the Heart: Ritual, Pilgrimage, and Transformation at Burning Man” (2005b). Unlike religious pilgrimages, Burning Man is a “ritual without dogma”, it is based on direct experience rather than rigid rules (Gilmore 2005b:45). It does, however, employ an orthopraxy through the “10 Principles” laid out

by the organization, such as the principles of participation and gifting. Fire is another ritualizing aspect at Burning Man; it offers participants a cathartic experience through sacrifice and release, and symbolically engages the transformative process of rites of passage. Burning Man is also a rite of pilgrimage in the sense that participants leave the mundane routine of everyday life and enter a liminal space. A feeling of *communitas* is fostered in this liminal world where social hierarchies and status are temporarily levelled (Gilmore 2005b:53). Gilmore concludes that the ritual journey to Burning Man brings about personal transformations for many individuals; her interviewees often reported a change in consciousness and changes in the limits that participants imposed upon themselves in their relationships outside of Burning Man.

The Ritual Process

All of these studies on Burning Man inform my thesis as they all touch on the moral practices which encompass the aesthetic community which I am exploring in my research. Specifically, I am interested in Gilmore's approach which uses Victor Turner's theories on ritual process as a framework for understanding the significance of Burning Man. Ritual has traditionally been anthropology's specific lens for understanding events (Hoffman and Lubkemann 2005). Originally elaborated in the Manchester School as a mechanism for mediating social tensions, ritual is now being examined as a process of social change rather than continuity (Sutton 2004, Hoffman and Lubkemann 2005). Several recent studies of Burning Man take the ritual process as their analytical frame and place much of their emphasis on the liminal phase of the ritual process, exploring the role of intersubjectivity and *communitas* at Burning Man (see Gilmore 2005b and 2008,

Hockett 2004, St. John 2009). Burning Man itself explicitly negotiates the language of liminality and *communitas* as a part of its reflexive project (Gilmore 2008). Graham St John, whose work has focused on Victor Turner's theories on ritual process, and electronic dance music culture (EDMC), explains that Burning Man

“possesses traits characteristic of a rite of passage (and/or pilgrimage), including the ‘release from mundane structures’, the movement of burners from center to periphery, participants ordeals, a ‘homogenization of status’, reflection on the meaning of basic religious and cultural values, and reaggregation in ‘decompression’ events” (St. John 2008:23).

In fact, the theme for Burning Man 2011 was “Rites of Passage”, indicating a clear link between Turner's language and Burning Man rhetoric. Thus, the frame of analysis used by anthropologists and the frame used by Burning Man participants overlap. Lee Gilmore argues this is because Turner's theories were affected by, and developed in, the context of heightened countercultural movements; his theories often reflected his own culture as much as those he was studying (2008:221). Indeed, Turner refers to the “beat generation” and “hippies” several times in *The Ritual Process* (1969) and Burning Man is also a descendent of those countercultural identities. Turner wrote extensively and his books gained widespread readership because their subject matter was appealing in the cultural climate, in many ways his ideas and contemporary North American countercultural movements informed each other.

One reason why Turner's work on the ritual process has been highlighted by contemporary anthropologists as a productive tool for understanding Burning Man experiences is because of the difference it draws between ordinary life and the ritual

experience. Unlike the social dramas which characterize everyday life, ritual process is characterized as ephemeral and extraordinary, and ultimately separate from mundane activities. The difference between extraordinary and ordinary life is explained by Turner through the indicative and subjunctive “mood” (1986:41). Social dramas reflect indicativity; they consist of “acts, states, occurrences that are factual, in terms of the cultural definition of factuality” (Turner 1986:41). Conversely, the subjunctive mood of most rituals, (including the Burning Man ritual) “expresses supposition, desire, hypothesis, [and] possibility” (1986:41) that is not represented in everyday practices. The subjunctive mood resonates with liminal reality.

The Ritual Process (1969) lays out the theoretical ground work for liminality and *communitas* as metagenres of ritual, essentially viewing them as the anti-structural elements of cultural processes, rather than structural-functional elements of cultural systems. Liminal spaces are usually accompanied by symbolic ambiguity and intensive sociality leading to *communitas*. According to Turner, in this state of affairs society is understood as an “unstructured or rudimentarily structured *comitatus*, community, or even communion of individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders” (1969:96). In the case of Burning Man the authority of the ritual elders can be understood through the festival’s 10 Principles. Burning Man exhibits both liminality and *communitas* through reflexive transgressions of the status quo. Reflexive transgression at countercultural festivals can take any number of forms but frequently includes special dress and/or activities, the consumption of alcohol and/or illegal drugs, as well as the temporary erasure of everyday statuses and roles and a levelling (or at the very least a reconfiguration) of social hierarchies (Pike 2001, Hockett 2004, St John 2009b).

Reflexive transgression then is an important part of liminality and *communitas* as they are lived or practiced ‘in-the-world’. Liminality, however, is part of a larger ritual process, identified by Arnold van Gennep (1960) and further elaborated by Turner, involving three stages: separation, liminality, and reaggregation. The first phase of the ritual process, separation, is characterized by the initiate being removed from the routine practices and their status of everyday life. The initiate is separated from the mundane structures and a conventional cultural condition. In the second phase, liminality, the initiate is thrust into an in-between realm where status is removed and the everyday routine is replaced by sacred time. Finally in the third phase of the ritual process, reaggregation, the initiate is returned into the fold of everyday life with a newly defined status (Turner 1969: 94-95). I will use these three phases as a map to follow my collaborators experiences at Burning Man and beyond.

Recently, anthropologists have begun to rethink the ways in which they use the concept of ‘event’ as an analytical tool (Hoffman and Lubkemann 2005, Jackson 2005). Daniel Hoffman and Steve Lubkemann note that while an event is arguably a precise moment in time and space, it is often extremely difficult to determine when exactly an event begins and when it ends. They suggest that events, as an analytical tool, might be more productive if we view them as part of social processes (2005:316-317). Is Burning Man contained temporally and spatially to the one week each year when fifty-thousand individuals gather in Black Rock Desert, Nevada? Or does it exist in more than one place? If we take Burning Man *in situ*, as a spatially and temporally contained experience, we can already assert that the meaning it takes on is given significance in a multitude of ways depending on the individual contexts and configurations that Burner’s

bring to the festival. As a rite of passage, pilgrimage, or ritual performance, we should also ask what the larger significance (re: beyond the festival grounds) of Burning Man is to the individuals who participate in it, as well as the feeling of community it fosters. It is not enough to explore *communitas* as an important aspect of Burning Man experiences, we must also ask ourselves in what ways do these events interact with practices in everyday life. This is where my research hopes to go beyond that of Gilmore (2005b and 2008) by placing a more even emphasis on the “before and after” of the liminal phase, and ultimately to understand how the moral practices of Burning Man are connected to the creation of communities outside of the event.

TAZ and Community

My research will use the idea of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) to explore how Burning Man participants export countercultural practices into their everyday lives. TAZ is also particularly suited to a study of Burning Man as the concept was developed through the same counterculture which gave birth to the Burning Man festival. Hakim Bey, an American poet and anarchist political philosopher began developing his ideas on TAZ in the mid-1980s around the same time Burning Man was coming into existence. His 1985 collection of essays: *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, and Poetic Terrorism* outlines his concept of the TAZ. He begins his research by examining primary source records of “pirate utopias”; islands and enclaves which once dotted the geopolitical map and were home to experimental, consciously self-governed societies which remained outside the law. He combines this forgotten past with the cyberpunk imagination of the future where decentralized

experimental communities flourish in fiction. Bey argues that in contemporary society these utopias cannot exist in any permanent way. The absolute global dominance of the State and industrial modes of production have resulted in a postmodern dystopia with no history, no truth, and no god. Indeed the idea of revolution itself has become a meaningless one as uprisings become successful revolutions, and the State regains its complete authority.

Pirate utopias are not dead however, they are alive in the TAZ. While not permanent, the TAZ is an uprising, an insurrection during which freedom and autonomy (from the State and its war machine of simulations) are achieved because the TAZ evades the State. Bey argues that it is a “tactic of disappearance” (1985:126) which makes the TAZ so effective. Once an uprising is detected by the State it is immediately consumed by it and reproduced as a simulation, an abstraction. The only way for an uprising to exist is beyond the gaze of the State, thus the impermanence of the TAZ. Furthermore, Bey stresses that disappearing as a tactic is not simply a negative action, it can also be a positive and logical radical option. For instance, Bey gives the example of schooling where one can tactically disappear through home schooling (a positive disappearance) or through voluntary illiteracy (a negative disappearance). However both disappearances are tactics against the State.

According to Bey, the TAZ is outside of the State in several ways. TAZs are tribal gatherings with a horizontal organization reminiscent of bands. They may vary from a few individuals to thousands, but their organization refrains from the implicit hierarchy of the nuclear family. (For Bey, the nuclear family emerges with the agricultural revolution and is therefore structured around scarcity, whereas bands and tribes are structured by

abundance.) These tribal gatherings participate in a festal culture characteristic of insurrection (Bey 1985:103). Festal culture is outside of profane time and privileges spontaneity. The TAZ also uses the tactic of psychic nomadism. We live in a global world where we can discover and merge ideas from all around us in an endless amount of ways (Bey gives the example of using science and Taoism to understand the world); we can travel psychic spaces and learn new ways of thinking about the world. However the structures of commodity fetishism render our encounters with cultural diversity passive and ultimately meaningless as “one place is as good as another” (Bey 1985:105). Psychic nomadism as a *tactic*, replaces the passive encounter with an active one in the TAZ, because the TAZ liberates these psychic spaces from the State; the psychic nomad is free to engage with cultural diversity as innovation (rather than simulation). Essentially, the TAZ is a radical politics for being in the world; one which undermines the status-quo through uprisings which escape the map of the State and its streamlined networks of information. The TAZ also shares similarities with the ritual process. As Hockett notes; “[the] eruption of spontaneous communitas is very similar to what occurs in Hakim Bey’s conception of the Temporary Autonomous Zone or TAZ” (2004:203).

The Cacophony Society is popularly known as the first group to put Bey’s TAZ into practice with events they called Zone Trips. The Cacophony Society is a group of artistic pranksters and culture jammers who emerged in San Francisco in the mid-1980s. According to Cacophony.org the Cacophony Society is “a randomly gathered network of individuals united in the pursuit of experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society through subversion, pranks, art, fringe explorations and meaningless madness”.¹² As an anarchist society they claim; “you may already be a member”, indicating that individuals

¹² <http://cacophony.org/>. Accessed December 22nd 2011.

are encouraged to engage in public pranks - usually wearing costumes or holding absurd props (cement filled teddy bears, for example) - in an effort to challenge or subvert mainstream social institutions. The groups are not formal and are often spontaneous. The Cacophony Society was also involved in organizing some of the first Burning Man events. When the Cacophony Society moved Burning Man to the Black Rock Desert in 1990, the event was called a Zone Trip:

“We all got out of our cars as one member drew a long line on the desert floor creating what we accepted as a ‘Zone gateway’. This was one of our Cacophony rituals, for the zone as we defined it took on many forms, it could be a weird house, a particularly strange neighbourhood (like Covina, CA), or a desolate, deserted warehouse. Today it was the base of a mountain range in Northern Nevada. We crossed the line and knew we were definitely not in Kansas anymore” (Gilmore 2005:52).

TAZ is also apparent in the countercultural practices of my collaborators before and after Burning Man. As a moral practice TAZ is a part of the lifeworlds of my collaborators. Michael Jackson defines the lifeworld as “the quintessence of a reality that is lived, experienced, and endured” (1996:19-20). He states that lifeworlds belong to individuals (not groups) however individuals always operate in a social context. The lifeworld, therefore, reflects both the individual’s experiences and the social contexts which inform them. Inasmuch, Jackson argues that “[for] anthropologists, it is the *social* reality of the lifeworld and forms of *social* consciousness which are of critical interest” (1996:19, original emphasis). For my thesis, these forms of social consciousness can be discerned in the moral practices and aesthetic lifestyles of my collaborators. So, how can

we access these lifeworlds? Jackson suggests that this can be done through an examination of narratives. Narrative is a useful conceptual tool for this study because it allows people to create shared meaning out of their experiences, what Jackson refers to as intersubjectivity (1996). The stories told by my collaborators about their Burning Man experience reveal shared meanings they attribute to the ritual process and frequently reflect ideas of collective identity, continuity, and coherence, in spite of the variability between my collaborators experiences. Essentially narratives are the process by which individuals make sense of disjuncture and resolve ambiguous experiences. Furthermore, as Michel de Certeau remarks, “[the] story does not express a practice. It does not limit itself to telling about a movement. It *makes* it.” (1984:81, original emphasis) Thus, the stories told by collaborators actively seek to make sense of their experiences and thereby create the continuity which so often eludes researchers.

Narratives of collective identity and countercultural practices often, and in this case do, reflect the idea of community. However given that this community does not have any kind of permanent place (the Temporary Autonomous Zone itself is always fleeting), the concept of community becomes difficult to pinpoint. As Doreen Massey notes “this new round of time-space compression has produced a feeling of disorientation, a sense of fragmentation of local cultures and a loss, in its deepest meaning, of a sense of place” (1994:162). This loss of meaning underscores the idea that communities have become unbound; inasmuch, they cannot be understood through homogeneous definitions of locality. Increasingly, communities can be understood as dynamic, shifting, and partial. Consequently, the ways in which community and place relate to identity is extremely context dependent, as individuals belong to a variety of communities and social networks

through which they move and in which they form their unique identities. Instead of representing social cohesion and cultural continuity, in the new state of affairs, community can be viewed as an in-between place reflecting cultural disjuncture and movement.

The fragmentation of community in contemporary social organization is often discussed in relation to new global capital relations that emphasize mobility over fixity. D'Andrea (2007), for example, discusses how the transnational communities of Techno and New Age countercultures are streamlined by economic structures to follow certain global flows of ideas and place. These transnational communities constitute emerging social formations. Amit (2002) discusses this new tendency towards flexibility through the lens of disjuncture; contemporary social relations increasingly accept fragmentation as a part of daily life and may, in fact, be seeking it in a reconfiguration of meaningful experiences. Tourism, for example, provides for an “extrication from the embeddedness of everyday life, a chance temporarily to escape the myriad activities, roles, obligations, expectations, representations, peers, intimates, adversaries and other consociations that impossibly complicate our usual routines” (Amit 2002:33). While Burning Man can certainly be considered a form of tourism if we emphasize the economic mechanisms of this type of movement, it has also been likened to religious pilgrimage and rites of passage (Gilmore 2008, Hockett 2004, St John 2009a) as well as new social movements including “neonomadism” (St John 2009b), “global nomads” (D'Andrea 2007), and finally, carnival (Clupper 2007, St John 2009b). Yet regardless of the frame(s) we use to understand Burning Man, mobility is a key aspect of its social practice; people travel to

and from the festival importing and exporting these countercultural practices from place to place.

Place is never completely fragmented either. As Massey comments, “the identity of place is in part constructed out of positive interrelations with elsewhere” (1994:169). While place and community may lack coherency, they maintain a sense of connectivity to the social worlds they operate in and around. Positive connections become interrelations between identities; however, these always remain flexible and strategic. Amit argues that instead of viewing the ambiguities surrounding community as an analytical problem we should view these ambiguities as analytical tools (2010:357-358). Similarly, Turner states at the end of the *The Ritual Process* that “[the] very flexibility and mobility of social relations in modern industrial societies, however, may provide better conditions for the emergence of existential *communitas*, even if only in countless and transient encounters” (1969:203). Amit proposes three strategic spots for examining ambiguities productively: joint commitment, affect-belonging, and forms of organization (2010:359). All three of these prove to be useful for examining the experiences of my collaborators in the stories they tell of their Burning Man experiences and how they construct community around their Burning Man experiences in TAZs.

2. Research Methods

In this chapter I will briefly describe where and how I did my research and I will introduce my main collaborators. While much of my research is based on the narratives of six key collaborators I also engaged in a large amount of event-based research activities. My research methods are integral to the design of my project because they involve finding and participating in alternative moral practices which is an important part of the ritual process. The places my research took me mirror the ritual process outlined by my collaborators. In many ways my research methods recreate the ritual process and mark the beginning of my own ritual journey.

The focal point of my research is to understand the ritual process in the lifeworlds of individuals, therefore, the interviews I conducted with my collaborators form the heart of my thesis. I conducted interviews with fourteen individuals living in Montreal concerning their Burning Man experiences. My goal was to let my collaborators tell me as much or as little as they liked about their Burning Man experience; for them to select the relevant from the irrelevant. I rarely asked direct questions and usually only asked my collaborators to elaborate on points I found particularly interesting in the stories they told me. I did, however, impose a temporal framework on my collaborators stories; I asked them to take me through their Burning Man experience beginning with the first time they remembered hearing about Burning Man festival, through their festival experiences, and finally how these experiences have affected their lives here in Montreal (if they have at all). This temporal framework, I assumed, would be useful for breaking down Burning Man experiences into the three broad stages of the ritual process (separation, liminality,

and reaggregation) and make sense of the ways my collaborators use the ritual process and personal narratives to construct continuity between the festival and everyday life.

Locating collaborators

Locating collaborators was difficult at first; while the Burning Man website stated that there was a regional Burning Man group in Montreal (the Montreal Burners/Brûleurs de Montréal), the contact information was out of date and the hyperlink sent me to an email address no longer in use. Fortunately, as my research progressed, I checked the regional contacts link several times until finally the page was updated and I came into contact with the Montreal Burners. Before I met with them, however, I conducted a handful of interviews with friends and friends of friends who I met over the course of my research. My first collaborator, Peter, is fittingly the first person I heard about Burning Man from. Peter put me into contact with several other individuals who had attended Burning Man. They, in turn, suggested other people they knew, and so my potential contacts and collaborators continued to grow. My collaborators ranged from their mid-twenties to their early forties and were both male and female, Francophones and Anglophones, and they were occupied variously as students, musicians/artists, doctors, and I.T workers to name some of the more frequent occupations.

Most interviews were conducted at the homes of my collaborators in neighbourhoods scattered over several boroughs of Montreal. As my collaborator Kay joked, this allowed me to “see the creature in its native habitat”. I also conducted a few interviews at my apartment when my collaborators indicated their preference for this. Interviews usually lasted no more than one hour and I conducted several one hour

sessions with some of my key collaborators. This allowed for some particularly reflexive storytelling; collaborators were able to reflect on their answers and continuously layer and reconstruct their Burning Man stories as our sessions continued to provide deeper insights.

I have chosen to focus on the narratives of six of my collaborators in my thesis. Every interview and all my collaborators were important contributions to my research. However, by focusing on six individuals I hope to reconstruct in greater depth their experiences of Burning Man and the connections they make to everyday life. The individuals I selected to focus on vary widely in age, occupation, and Burning Man experience, the latter being the most important marker for my decision. By selecting individuals with a wide range of Burning Man experiences I hope to produce a heterogeneous reflection of how my collaborators incorporated Burning Man into everyday life. The six collaborators I have chosen to focus on are: Peter, Jane, Chris, Cam, Pierre, and Kay. Peter is a forty year old I.T worker who attended Burning Man for his first time in 1999 and has been back four times since then. Jane and Chris used to date and have each been to Burning Man once, in different years, and their experiences were very different. Jane is in her mid-twenties and is a graduate student at McGill, and Chris is in his early thirties, and has recently become a “self-supporting” musician. Pierre and Cam are both in their late thirties and they are married with a two year old girl. They discovered Burning Man in 2006 when they moved to Seattle to pursue a PhD and post-doctoral work respectively. They have returned virtually every year since, except for the two years Cam took off for the birth of their daughter, 2010 was her first year back. Finally, Kay is in his early thirties and is one of the two lead contacts for the Montreal

Burners. Kay has attended Burning Man seven times, in Montreal he is employed in a wide variety of technical jobs and contract work, involving video editing and web design.

Events

I also attended several events to conduct participant observation. First, I attended Burning Man 2010 which took place between August 31st and September 6th 2010 in Black Rock Desert, Nevada. The purpose of this research was to gain first-hand experience of the Burning Man festival in order to have a feel for the ritual process that my collaborators experienced. I traveled to Burning Man from San Francisco on a pre-arranged bus trip with The Green Tortoise Adventure Travels. The Green Tortoise bus trip included food, water, a communal shade structure and cook tent (where we cooked communal meals), bicycle transportation to and from the festival, and a chance to meet travelers from all over the world going to Burning Man together. In 2010 The Green Tortoise sent 5 buses to Burning Man and our camp was just over 200 people from a range of countries including the U.S., Canada, U.K., Germany, Australia, Japan, Ireland, and South Africa. I was immediately impressed by the international representation and struck by the role that Burning Man has started to play as a nexus for organizing alternative moral practices. I spent most of my time at Burning Man with campmates; exploring the festival, making meals, and hiding from the scalding afternoon sun under our communal shade structure.

At Burning Man I attended everything from roller disco to the ritualistic burning of “The Man”; who, in 2010, was a forty foot wooden effigy in the middle of the desert. I bicycled around Black Rock City exploring the festival but never discovering the whole

thing, I went to Center Camp with my camp-mates to drink coffee and listen to poetry readings or bands play. With my camp-mates I also went bar-hopping and raving on a few nights, staying out to the early hours of the morning and sleeping until late in the afternoon. We also cooked all our meals together (for two hundred people on large camping stoves, three times a day) and spent hours sitting around lazily talking about the crazy things we had seen each time we ventured out of camp. Some of my camp-mates knew I was doing research on Burning Man and many of them would approach me and tell me their own experiences while I tried to scribble hurried notes.

I spent six days prior to Burning Man, and two days after it, in San Francisco staying at The Green Tortoise Hostel which is directly associated with the Adventure Travels enterprise. The days I spent in San Francisco allowed me to establish contact with Burners prior to the event at the hostel I was staying at, and to get last minute supplies which were too expensive or large to bring on my flight from Montreal. Upon returning to San Francisco after Burning Man, many of the Burners from the Green Tortoise camp continued to celebrate in the days which followed, and I took this opportunity to attend a post-Burn party with the camp-mates I became closest with at Zeitgeist, a punk bar in the Mission District of San Francisco. These experiences inform my own Burning Man ritual process and my understanding of the stories my collaborators recounted.

Upon returning to Montreal I began corresponding with the Montreal Burners and I attended several of their monthly potluck suppers at which I met an array of individuals; some of whom were long-time Burners, others who had never attended Burning Man but had taken an interest in the event and were searching to learn more. Potlucks were held in different neighbourhoods of Montreal, at the homes of participants who volunteered to be

the host for that month. They were organized using the Montreal Burners mailing list and a Montreal Burners Facebook group. I met a number of my collaborators at these events and I was able to observe people organizing around Burning Man in everyday life.

I also attended an event called Relaxation Lounge which is organized by one of my main collaborators, Peter. The event is not directly related to Burning Man, however Peter repeatedly referred to this event in his stories about Burning Man in everyday life. So, I attended Relaxation Lounge and as a favour to Peter I worked at the door charging admission and asking people to take off their shoes.

Next I attended the Montreal Burners Burning Man decompression event for 2010, “TaBURNak Deux”. I also joined the planning committee’s mailing list and was able to observe, through over 350 emails, the thoughtful and extensive organization of this event. Finally, I was able to conduct interviews with several individuals who attended the event. It was held in mid-November, 2010 at a loft space in Griffintown; the event began with a potluck at 7 p.m. and ended at daybreak after a night of music, art, and dancing.

Lastly, I attended two meetings with a group called “Bande de Québécois à Burning Man”. I found this group on Facebook while I was communicating with the Montreal Burners on the same website. Essentially the “Bande” is a group of Burning Man “virgins”¹³ who are organizing a theme camp for the 2011 Burning Man festival. Since none of the members have previous Burning Man experiences they will not be a central element in my thesis. However, the meetings, which gathered between 15-20 individuals, were fascinating for highlighting how individuals first hear about and organize around Burning Man. The Montreal Burners have also taken an interest in the

¹³ A “virgin” is someone who has not yet attended Burning Man.

“Bande”, illustrating a potential for a larger Burning Man community in Montreal in the future.

3. Finding the Neo-Tribe

I always began personal interviews by asking my collaborators to tell me when they first heard about Burning Man and how they eventually ended up making their way to the event. Initially I had imagined asking my collaborators about the physical journey to Burning Man, the tangible separation from their daily lives and the winding road into the desert. But I realized that the journey began before that when I contemplated my own introduction to Burning Man. It was in 2005 when I was attending a psychedelic trance¹⁴ festival (a weekend long rave in Quebec's countryside) that a friend first told me about Burning Man, and I listened as he described a far away world of wonderfully surreal large scale art and happenings. It was through my involvement in Montreal's rave scene that I was informally introduced to Burning Man and it was in the context of rave culture, or electronic dance music culture (EDMC), that I became interested in the event. Likewise, what my collaborators described was not a simple separation from their everyday lives to Burning Man; most of them described a series of events and circumstances which led up to departing for Burning Man, it is these contexts which I would like to explore in this chapter.

According to Turner, separation "comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both" (1969:94). Therefore, at the outset of the ritual journey, I am not only asking when my collaborators first went to Burning Man and became detached from a set of cultural conditions, but also what are the cultural conditions that they became detached from, and why do they choose to detach themselves in the first place? From the stories my collaborators shared with me, I began

¹⁴ Psychedelic trance is a style of electronic dance music (EDM).

to realize that one of the common themes underlying their narratives was a desire to *belong* to an alternative aesthetic. All of my collaborators self-identify as middle class (varying from lower to upper) with dispensable income who, during their leisure time, engage in identity defining leisure activities. Inasmuch as my collaborators identify with alternative aesthetics the question is also to what degree are these aesthetics actually “separate” from more normative cultural aesthetics. Thus, the first part of my discussion will describe the contexts through which my collaborators found out about and identified with Burning Man lifestyles (practices and aesthetics), and the second part of my discussion will explore the differences and similarities between alternative and normative moral practices for my collaborators.

Word of Mouth

It is hard to learn about Burning Man living in Canada. As the event is not commercially advertised it is difficult to imagine the social networks (using word of mouth) which would transport the knowledge of Burning Man all the way to Montreal. This might be different in places like San Francisco and Seattle which host large communities of Burners who organize events year round. Local newspapers in the Bay Area have articles about Burning Man and the event is among their event listings thereby providing a more accessible forum for learning about Burning Man. This is not the case in Canada. The internet is a useful place to learn about Burning Man, but of course, one would first need to have heard about it to look it up. Only one of my collaborators told me they first heard about Burning Man through the internet; Kay regularly browsed the website

*Disinformation*¹⁵ for alternative news and videos. It was on this site that he was first exposed to Burning Man and he did all the follow up research necessary (like visiting the Burning Man website and speaking with previous attendees on the ePlaya – an online message board for Burners) to make the decision to attend.

Several of my collaborators connect their eventual participation at Burning Man with their previous experiences in EDMC and related music festivals. Peter recalls that he first heard about Burning Man when he began going to raves in 1998 and making friends with people who were in the rave scene in Vancouver, where he lived at that time. He was in his early twenties and not sure what he wanted to do in life; he was working in technical support for an internet provider at the time (he still works in technical support today) and he had no post-secondary education. (In 2002 he enrolled in a massage certificate course when he moved to Quebec City from Vancouver but he never completed the certificate). As Peter puts it:

parties [raves] back then for me were like going to church. It was my ritual gathering with my peers, you know, in celebration... What church was supposed to be like, you know, celebrating life, and I did this with these people. And this collective, whose parties I went to, their parties always revolved around pagan things and nature; the winter solstice, the summer solstice, spring equinox.¹⁶

¹⁵ According to their website, Disinformation “collects the most shocking, unusual and quirkiest news articles, podcasts and videos on the web, most of which are submitted by the site’s visitors.” <http://www.disinfo.com/about/> Accessed February 21st 2012.

¹⁶ Interview November 6th 2010.

Eventually his closest friends from the raves he attended became his roommates, and they planned their first trip to Burning Man in 1999. In a later interview Peter told me that raves helped him “heal from the nine-to-five grind” and “to feel really connected with people [...] Burning Man seemed like a bigger and better version of that so we wanted to do it.”¹⁷ Part of what drew Peter to EDMC was the utopian vision of the culture; “what church was supposed to be like [...] celebrating life.” The pagan themes are reminiscent of an idealized tribal time; the past meets the present in the form of electronically produced sacred drumming. The initiates celebrate life and give thanks through their joyful dancing. These pagan sensibilities were also integral to the alternative aesthetic and moral practices of the earliest Burning Man events. According to Jerry James (carpenter and Burning Man co-founder) the first Burning Man was held on the summer solstice in 1986 (Bonin 2009). Many of the Burning Man co-founders, like Larry Harvey himself, were interested in (re)creating pagan rituals (Bonin 2009).

Chris first heard about Burning Man when he attended Shambhala festival in 2005. Shambhala is a four day EDM festival held in Salmo British Columbia, just east of the Okanagan Valley on a ranch where participants camp out and party. According to their website:

Shambhala is, and always will be, completely free of corporate sponsorship and is funded solely by ticket sales. It grew organically by word of mouth – friends bringing friends – from a small gathering of 500 or so people in '98 to

¹⁷ Interview January 18th 2011.

the small city of 10,000 it is today. Ticket sales are capped at 10,000, keeping it an intimate gathering.¹⁸

Shambhala is similar to Burning Man in the type of people who decide to attend, according to Chris. His experience at Shambhala is what exposed him to what he calls the “freak family”:

There’s this whole culture out there, well, actually several cultures that make this whole bigger one that I had no idea existed. And I sort of left [Shambhala] with the feeling like “Who are all these people?” They don’t turn on the freak switch just for those four days. I had just never seen them before. I mean the clothing was one thing that really struck me; elfin leather utility belts, and feathers in your hats. You know, it is incredible tattoos, piercings... people are very comfortable with their nudity and everything. And they really know how to party!¹⁹

Shambhala is much smaller than Burning Man and it is focused specifically on EDM whereas Burning Man is much broader in its artistic spectrum. Logistically, Shambhala is set up like most mainstream music festivals (and unlike Burning Man); a main stage with the biggest acts playing on it, and several smaller stages with artists playing different musical styles from the main stage. After attending Shambhala in 2005 Chris reasoned:

¹⁸ <http://www.shambhalamusicfestival.com/info/about-shambhala/> Accessed Monday August 15th, 2011.

¹⁹ Interview April 20th 2010.

If Shambhala is a wicked party, Burning Man is an incredible social experiment that is five times the size. So I came back to Montreal, started working in record stores and tried to figure out what the hell I was going to do with a philosophy degree. And, like a lot of people, the decision to go to Burning Man and actually going to Burning Man took two years. In 2006 I would have loved to have gone but it was just not going to happen. Then in 2007, I decided that to make up for last summer's lack of ridiculous festivals, I'm going to all of them. Well, sort of. I went to Evolve on the East coast of Canada in Nova Scotia²⁰, then I flew to the West coast, to attend Shambhala again, and then I got a ride share that I found online to drive down the coast and you know, make a stop in Reno and get mad supplies to take into the desert [to Burning Man]. And, yeah, that was awesome.²¹

Jane first heard about Burning Man as a teenager in Toronto and only attended the festival several years later.

It's hard for me to remember because it was a long time ago, I think I was about 17 or 18 and I was really into photography and then somehow it came up, someone suggested this crazy festival down in the States in the desert. I heard originally that you could go and volunteer and get in for free (laughs) even though that's not the case. But yeah, that's how it started; I was in

²⁰ According to their website, Evolve is a festival celebrating "music and [environmental] awareness". It is a three day event held in the summer where participants camp on-site and see local and world-class EDM artists perform as well as bands. Evolve, much like Shambhala, claims to be a grassroots festival. <http://www.evolvefestival.com/about/>

²¹ Interview April 20th 2010.

Toronto, I moved a lot [with my mother] up and down the West Coast, and when I was living in Toronto [Burning Man] just came up as something to do. I vaguely remember I was with another girl who was young too; we were hanging out with older kids, going to clubs and stuff like that. So she was a little more radical, like me.²²

Jane considered herself to be relatively radical as a teenager; she moved around a lot with her mother, she was artistic and hung out with older kids, going to clubs before she was the legal age. The club scene and “radical art” eventually led her to Shambhala festival in British Columbia which, as we have seen, has emerged as a common node among many of my collaborators. At a Montreal Burners potluck (which I will describe in greater detail in Chapter 6), Toby told me that he first heard about Burning Man among tree planters in Manitoba. Tree planters learn about the festival’s existence because of the seasonal and mobile nature of this kind of employment. According to Toby many people who have done tree planting also do fruit picking in the summer and early fall. In Canada this often leads them to the Okanagan valley in British Columbia. From the valley, some of the fruit pickers make their way to Shambhala Music Festival, and eventually some make it all the way to Burning Man.

Aside from EDMC and its related grassroots festivals, some of my collaborators first heard about Burning Man through regional Burning Man communities (on this, see Chapter 6). Cam and Pierre, who were pursuing post-doctoral research and doctoral research respectively, moved to Seattle for work and found themselves almost immediately surrounded by Burning Man enthusiasts. As Cam recalls:

²² Interview November 5th, 2010

I think that the first time [I heard about Burning Man] was when Pierre moved to Seattle. I drove him out to Seattle with his parents, we went on this road trip, and then when we arrived in Seattle his future housemate had a car and they were loading it up to go to Burning Man, and that was the first time I kind of saw it. I went back to Montreal after that trip and I was here for another four months before I moved out to Seattle myself. So it was a bit of a fortuitous thing where Pierre had been out there for a few months and he had met people through school, I went out there and I didn't know anybody, but some of the first people we befriended happened to be part of the Burning Man community. And that's kind of how I got to hear about it was just through people. Well, you hear about it in Seattle and there were lots of events that were in some way peripherally related to Burning Man. [...] For me the community was more the social activities whether it just be the potlucks, or the gatherings, working on art projects, or the fundraisers for Burning Man art projects.²³

Pierre, Cam's husband, describes the gatherings they attended in Seattle as "surreal art in practice":

The gatherings were not like your everyday get-togethers... they were sort of magical and surreal. You know we would have costume parties, build weird

²³ Interview February 9th 2011.

sculptures and then bring them to the park where we would hula hoop, some people would do fire spinning, we'd usually have a picnic...²⁴

As we will see in the next section, while rave attendees were finding an alternative aesthetics in the ecstatic release on the dance floor, Cam and Pierre were finding an artistic release from the clinical setting of their everyday lives through alternative artistic practices.

Alternative Aesthetics

Hearing about Burning Man through word of mouth means that individuals need to be around the right people, like Chris' "freak family" at Shambhala; adorned in "elfin leather utility belts [and] comfortable with their nudity", or Pierre and Cam's social network who created surreal art gatherings. In fact, Chris' description is fairly close to what St John calls the "freak":

In countercultural history, the freak is never straight, stationary or complete, always somewhere in-between and entirely ambiguous with regard to moral rules, dress codes, gender regulations, disciplined embodiment and legal mind states. Transgressing categories, trespassing psychic limits, seeking forbidden knowledge and drifting between marginal sites, as ontological nomads, freaks are characterized by movement and uncertainty. (2009b:47).

²⁴ Interview February 9th 2011.

Chris' narrative of traveling from one festival to another in 2007, and eventually ending the summer at Burning Man resonates with this idea of the freak. Moving in-between places, both physically and symbolically, is another common theme in my collaborators stories. As Jane explains:

It's like a nomadic tribe. I think human beings just have that... we have been doing that for a long time. I remember a friend that I traveled with going to Burning Man. It was her second year but she said to one traveler on the road "I'm doing the annual journey to Burning Man". So she does the whole circuit right, and they continue on to do other festivals through the States and then they go to Europe and do all those festivals. (Laughs) The rich hippie travelling community, that's what it is. Some of them are really rich. I mean the friend that I traveled with is a jeweller; she now sells pieces for hundreds of dollars online. She lives in Nelson; a lot of them are craftsmen so I think they go in the winter into their hippy-huts in the woods and then work. Or a lot of them are working in [pot] trimming in California.²⁵

The ideal of being able to travel around from festival to festival while simultaneously being able to support oneself is rarely achieved. Students are apt to take advantage of seasonal work in the summer which may allow for traveling and some merrymaking. But for most the decision to go to Burning Man requires planning, booking time off at work, and putting money aside. Several of my collaborators highlighted this ideal of the traveling freak, living on the periphery in a seemingly permanent state of

²⁵ Interview November 5th, 2010

liminality. While most can't live in it forever, many try to live in this countercultural periphery as often as possible.

What is it about raves and local underground art scenes that makes them countercultural, and why are my collaborators interested in them? Raves often have a surreal and tribal aesthetic; fluorescent paintings and fabrics lit by black light hang in an otherwise cavernous darkness. The DJs – shamans – play their music and the exceptionally loud and deep bass shakes the walls of this imagined primordial cave; rave attendees stand in the belly of the sound and the haunting black lights, a sea of bodies dancing repetitiously together, with the music. The “vibe” on the dance floor is key to understanding the experience of immediacy and intersubjectivity which occurs at raves. St John argues that the vibe can be likened to a sort of spiritual experience that “is commonly translated by participants as ‘tribal’, which appears to signify a desire for a sacred sociality, a social warmth howsoever temporary, perceived to have been lost or forgotten in the contemporary world of separation, privatization and isolation.” (2009b:38-39). Indeed the collective jouissance at raves transcends the isolated individual who becomes infected by the vibe.

Peter explained above how important raves were to him when he began attending them, he described raves as a “ritual gathering [...] celebrating life” and something “he *did* with these people” (emphasis added). This sense of immediacy and participation that comes from the rave experience is, in Peter's own word, a “ritual”. Similarly, St John notes that “as the dance floor is thought to contextualize an abandonment of the sociocultural roles and status expectations by which individuals are routinely divided, Turner's “spontaneous communitas” has proven particularly appealing to dance scholars

and ethnographers” (2008b:155). This abandonment of sociocultural roles is akin to the detachment from a set of cultural conditions found in the ritual phase of separation. More specifically, St John suggests that ravers are separating themselves, at least temporarily, from “the routine *habitus*, conventional gender roles, or the crushing ennui of work lives” (2008b:154, original emphasis). Ravers are seeking temporary relief in countercultural ritual experience.

The surreal aesthetic and tribalism apparent at raves also suggests that in at least some cases raves participate in contemporary countercultural production. Much like the counterculture of the sixties which attempted to reinvent culture through alternative lifestyles, spiritualities, psychedelic drugs, and the “love” ethos, in our contemporary condition of time-space compression – global technological culture – counterculture becomes a phenomena where individuals search for alternative aesthetics of social organization on a transient and shifting global scale (Hockett 2004:98). Both the counterculture of the sixties and contemporary counterculture are committed to creating and re-creating cultural artefacts and lifestyles (aesthetics) which escape the simulation of top-down modes of production and their associated alienated lifestyles. Indeed the moral practices of the counterculture seek to create experiences outside of the mainstream of society; where a “neo-tribal” aesthetic becomes immediacy and direct participation.

Of course, all of my collaborators are embedded in the capitalist consumer cultures they seek to subvert through their leisure activities. This is why Hockett argues it is perhaps best to understand that counterculture “is more of a *mode*, than a *state*, of being, something one enters and exists sometimes by choice, sometimes by circumstance, sometimes by force and sometimes totally unknowingly” (2004:98). Thus, after working

nine to five all week, Peter chooses to go to raves, where he can change modes of being. This alternative mode of being in contemporary countercultures is, as St John argues, committed to de-individualization:

a model of contemporary social life which attempts to explain the Dionysian commitment among Europeans for assembling and reassembling in passionate 'neo-tribes' complementary to, or in place of, crumbling traditional institutions (e.g. Church, nuclear-family, clan, etc). The production and reproduction of moments of *being together* is considered to be a primary commitment of neo-tribes. (St John 2009b:39-40).

Peter's reflection that raves were like going to church captures this idea of the neo-tribe. Essentially, for participants of counterculture, the mainstream is often experienced as isolating; counterculture seeks to break this isolation by creating alternative aesthetics through immediacy in social relations and a leveling of social roles, however briefly.

As Peter noted above, part of the mainstream culture he is trying to escape when he goes to raves is the nine to five job, or some variant, which compartmentalizes work from play. Similarly, leisure itself, without the *jouissance* of a sacred sociality, becomes tedious. Cam, who is married and has a two year old girl with her husband Pierre, spends most of the little leisure time she gets falling asleep on the sofa to a movie. As she explains:

I really enjoy finding artistic and creative outlets, particularly for me where I enjoy all things creative and artistic but in my daily life I'm not an artistic person, partly because my work is not artistic at all. I'm a scientist. And I think I do find creativity in my work but it's very intellectual; there's nothing physical, there's nothing tangible, and it's certainly not creative in an emotional or spiritual sense... but I like it [creativity], and sometime a long time ago in the past I used to have the time to do that but I don't really anymore.

The immediacy in the countercultural enclaves which led my collaborators to Burning Man makes the creativity experienced in them physical and tangible to participants. They feel, in these spaces, like they have escaped from mundane time, however temporary. (Imagine; the middle class is disappearing during the night into secret rooms – raves – with secret rituals – dance – and here they are learning the teachings which will one day bring them to Burning Man.) They disassociate themselves from what they perceive as the middle class dream and attempt to live alternative lifestyles. This is apparent in Cam's description of the people who participated in the Burner community she found in Seattle:

It was a combination of post-undergrad, it was not the really young party people, but it was still people who were a little bit older whether they be in grad school or professionals or parents or what not, but still liked that lively social gathering... and who were eccentric in some way or other, and who, if they were not eccentric themselves, certainly by proxy liked being around

that eccentricity. And also I think that there was the fact that we didn't perceive contradictions; well on the one hand you might be a professional holding down a very serious job and you might want to go out and dress in drag when you go dancing, or you might have a family but having a family didn't mean that you had a suburban lifestyle.²⁶

My collaborators were clearly aware that their everyday lives were “mainstream”, yet they all emphasized their desire to push the boundaries of normalcy when opportunities would permit it. Indeed, my collaborators narratives have indicated that individuals are using countercultural practices to detach themselves from certain cultural conditions. Part of the question also involves to what degree these countercultural practices effectively subvert mainstream culture. Raves and the alternative communities described by Cam do not escape consumer culture; attendees are usually middle class patrons who choose to spend their leisure time and resources investing into particular interests. In a broader sense, anti-structure never really escapes structure, and Turner's contemporaries have reflected on this when developing their theories on the ritual process (St John 2008a). Essentially, by signalling a relationship between structure and anti-structure, and by identifying anti-structure as normative in a dialectical sense, Turner and his contemporaries also address the often repeated criticism that because countercultural movements are no less structured than the social forms they critique, the transgressive significance that they carry is nothing more than an illusion, or a false consciousness.

Rather, transgression can be viewed reflexively in liminal rituals; a degree of irony and inversion are a part of the ritual process because individual actors are conscious

²⁶ Interview February 9th 2011.

of the things they experience. Individuals think about the things that they do, they are not passive recipients of anti-structural forms. In-between places, liminal phenomena “constitute metalanguages (including nonverbal ones), devised for talking about the various languages of everyday” (Babcock 2001: 8863). Thus, the countercultural practices described by my collaborators are meant to comment on everyday life, not escape it. What my collaborators stressed was that these leisure activities were also infused with moral practices which emphasized community and immediacy in social relationships: neo-tribes.

There is, nevertheless, one normalizing element of anti-structure which eventually motivated several of my collaborators to attend Burning Man. Even while my collaborators were engaging in alternative lifestyles, the lifestyles they were engaging in became increasingly predictable and they needed to look beyond their current practices to find new ways to engage in spontaneity and immediacy, and to constantly reinvent their countercultural moral practices. Their initial encounter with the surreal esthetic of neo-tribes led them to Black Rock Desert to pursue larger surreal goals. As Chris stated above, “Burning Man is an incredible social experiment”.

4. Enacting Alternatives

Continuing with the ritual journey, this chapter will examine the liminal phase in the ritual process by focusing on my collaborators experiences at Burning Man. I will address the following research questions in this chapter: Why is Burning Man described as a liminal place by both researchers and participants? How is liminality experienced at Burning Man? And what ritual knowledge do participants gain at Burning Man?

According to Turner during the second phase of the ritual process, “the characteristics of the ritual subject (the “passenger”) are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (1969:94). The ambiguous cultural realm of Burning Man is both physical and moral; the surreal dusty expanse of the Playa decorated with large-scale and interactive art is an affront to the senses, and the immediacy (and eccentricities) of social interactions can push people to new interpersonal limits.



Figure 6: Human ant farm on the Playa. Photograph by author.



Figure 7: Participants climb and converge around a massive sculpture near Center Camp. Photograph by author.

By weaving my collaborators experiences with Turner's theories on liminality and *communitas* as well as Bakhtin's theory on carnival, I hope to illustrate how Burning Man is a highly formative experience for many of its participants and it is a nexus for practical countercultural knowledge because of its emphasis on participation and communal effort.

Entering the Sacred Periphery

In *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* Victor and Edith Turner describe the central attributes of the liminal phase as follows:

...release from mundane structure, homogenization of status; simplicity of dress and behaviour; *communitas*; ordeal; reflection on the meaning of basic religious and cultural values; ritualized enactment of correspondences between religious paradigms and shared human experiences; emergence of the integral person from multiple personae; movement from a mundane center to a sacred periphery which suddenly, transiently, becomes central for the individual, an *axis mundi* of his faith; movement itself, a symbol of *communitas*, which changes with time, as against stasis which represents structure; individuality posed against the institutionalized milieu; and so forth. (Turner and Turner 1978:34)

Thus, to begin with the physical milieu of Burning Man, the Playa is often regarded by organizers and participants as the perfect blank canvas for creating the ultimate surreal space: a temporary city in the middle of a nowhere. Black Rock Desert certainly constitutes a periphery with virtually nothing surrounding it except the small city of Gerlach with a population under five hundred. Indeed the idea to move Burning Man from Baker's Beach in San Francisco to the Black Rock Desert in 1990 derived from the need to find a place where participants could burn a large effigy with a few thousand people present and without the authorities knowing²⁷. The Playa is an incredibly flat, dusty, and lifeless surface which extends about 100 miles; it is bordered to the east and west by the Jackson Mountains and Calico Mountains, respectively, which loom purple in

²⁷ When the authorities did eventually catch on that a large effigy was being burned in the desert the Burning Man organizers were able to strike a deal with the Bureau of Land Management to continue the event legally.

the distance against the tanned ground, and the open sky. As Hockett notes, “[t]he status of this space is *ontologically* different from that extending beyond its borders” (2004:155, original emphasis), meaning that Burning Man is, at least temporarily, the *axis mundi* of countercultural ritual experience, and it constitutes a pilgrimage for participants.

For Turner, pilgrimage has many of the same characteristics as liminality. However one exception is that pilgrimage is voluntary whereas liminality in itself is often “an obligatory social mechanism to mark the transition of an individual or group” (1978:35). As pilgrimage is voluntary there are elements of comradeship and *communitas* which are not always featured in liminality (Turner 1978). Researchers and participants have both noted that part of what makes Burning Man an intensely liminal experience is “the arduous journey of pilgrimage” (Gilmore 2005b:53-54). Participants leave their everyday lives and make their way to Black Rock Desert, Nevada, loading up on gear including gallons of water and camping equipment for a week. Jane (who is a graduate student in religious studies) described her journey to me as a pilgrimage:

I wrote about this in a paper for one of my religious studies classes; [Burning Man] looks so much like a religious pilgrimage. I thought it was so cool... Eventually, there are all these roads coming from different parts of the country and different parts of the world, and then eventually we are going along the same road, and then there’s a little town outside of Nevada where you all stop in for your last supplies, and then it’s seriously getting dark because it’s going to be midnight when you get to the gates, and you’re all on

that one winding road going through the desert, and there are signs everywhere reading “You’re getting closer to home”.²⁸

The image Jane evokes of many roads converging into one is reminiscent of images of pilgrims journeying to Mecca. Indeed Burning Man is a spiritual home for many participants and, as a result of this sacred connection, the periphery itself becomes spiritually imbued; participants begin to identify this sacred space as a new symbolic playground, one which releases them from the mundane symbolic structure of their everyday lives. Thus the idea of being home at Burning Man, or coming home to Burning Man, which was repeatedly impressed upon me by my collaborators is of particular significance to any future discussion of community vis-à-vis the ritual process. Virtually every one of them recounted the rite of passage of being welcomed home at the front gates. Chris describes his own process of being welcomed home:

And of course when I got to the gates we were, you know, greeted by this guy who is all dressed up in full Burner gear, and he gave us all a big hug and he said; “Welcome home”. I was kind of like; “that’s a little cheesy”. One thing that happened later on was that by day five or so, I remember starting to feel really sad that it was coming to the end [of the event]. And the words “welcome home” that the guy said at the gate started to make a lot of sense. That’s why this isn’t even... It’s not just a little catch phrase, this really is our home, and that whole “everyone here is a citizen of Black Rock City”, you know, this isn’t a party that we just come to, to get crazy. It was like, no I

²⁸ Interview May 5th, 2010

really am home here, and I think I prefer this reality to any other. Like, you know, the “real world” back out there. And, oh my god, there’s only a day and half left and I just want this to last forever. You really get into a groove, you’re comfortable there and you get into a routine. The unexpected is still a big part of that routine.²⁹

Chris explains how the periphery begins to feel like home to him after awhile, he begins to favour the liminal reality of Burning Man over the cultural conditions of his everyday life, this is all part of the initiation ritual which is, of course, supposed to release the individual back into their everyday life with a new status and new roles, this will be the subject of the next chapter. For the moment it is important to understand that being home in this sacred periphery is a meaningful experience for participants. There is usually a component of anxiety prior to leaving for Burning Man, whether it is a participant’s first burn or whether they are a seasoned veteran. As Pierre reflects:

The intensity of the experience begs me to ask myself some really existential questions like: What do I hope to learn from this experience and how do I expect to become a better person through this? And, what does it even mean to be a good person!³⁰

Similarly, Pierre’s wife, Cam, said she always worries a little before each burn:

²⁹ Interview April 9th 2010.

³⁰ Interview February 9th 2011.

[...] will I be able to let go and really connect with people, you know, to let go of all those layers we wear for work – I mean mental and emotional layers – and sometimes for our families, just to let go of all that and get in touch with something bigger than all that.³¹

Many of my collaborators used the sacred periphery of the Playa to reflect on existential questions and their “integral person” as Turner put it. Discarding the layers of mundane life, participants are ready to experience the *communitas* which accompanies the liminal phase. Burning Man manifests a spontaneous *communitas* in which participants feel a sense of belonging and togetherness. The experience of *communitas* can also be explained through the concept of intersubjectivity; where participants become predominantly social beings creating shared meanings and empathetic relationships. Husserl believed that intersubjectivity was a *condition* for the possibility of communication rather than a product (Duranti 2010:9). Inasmuch the questions we must ask are; what are the particular characteristics of intersubjectivity at Burning Man? And, what kinds of communication are made possible? To address the first question, Duranti argues that beyond creating shared meaning and empathetic relationships, intersubjectivity is “the possibility of being in the place where the Other is” (2010:1). Burning Man’s ethos of participation helps build this kind of intersubjective experience as participants are required to work together to build camps and to engage in spontaneous performances all over the Playa.

Individuals are strongly encouraged to be participants at Burning Man, and being at home at the festival means participating. Because Burning Man is a large scale living

³¹ Interview February 9th 2011.

art festival one of the ways many people participate is by wearing costumes and engaging in theatrical interactions. I participated in a faux wedding at my Green Tortoise camp one afternoon. Every year one of the Green Tortoise bus drivers gets married at Burning Man. Our camp's lunch was turned into a wedding party. I was grabbed by the arm minutes before the wedding started and made the bridesmaid even though I didn't know the bride. Everyone improvised.



Figure 8: Wedding at the Green Tortoise camp. Photograph by author.

There is also an abundance of other activities one can engage in while wandering around Black Rock City and all the events are organized by and for participants. A regular complaint I heard at Burning Man (one which, as an anthropologist, I could only sympathize with too well) was that there was not enough time to do and see everything at the festival. One camp mate told me, “You’re lucky if you get to experience ten percent of Burning Man.”³² While some activities take the form of workshops (yoga, bike repairs, and capoeira are just a tiny sample of an almost inexhaustible list) or parties (like the

³² Fieldnotes September 3rd 2010.

spontaneous AC/DC party I attended one night), others are more adventurous and theatrical. For instance the “Thunder Dome” is a very large geodesic dome set up in the open Playa. Two participants are strapped in using harnesses and bungee cords. Hanging inside and from the top of the Thunder Dome, the two participants engage in all out combat – kicking, punching, and pushing off of each other – with only one referee inside the dome with them to end the fight. Crowds gather to taunt the combatants, watching the fight from outside the geodesic dome or by climbing on top of it.



Figure 9: Burners taunting at the Thunder Dome. Photograph by author.

Most of my collaborators described how they participated by volunteering at various theme camps. When participants are making arrangements to go to Burning Man they must find a place to camp at the event. This often means either volunteering at a theme camp or camping in a location with no theme camp. The latter was viewed by my collaborators as “missing part of the experience”³³, and was perhaps one indication that

³³ Interview October 17th 2009.

some Burning Man participants were spectators³⁴. Furthermore, while my collaborators often engaged in activities at theme camps that they weren't actually camping at, they seemed to view this kind of participation as less participatory than "hosting" a theme camp. This is at least partially related to the idea of gifting at Burning Man.

Black Rock City is built on the (often enormous) personal investment of time and resources of all its participants, if Burners do not serve a little time creating theme camps and only participating in others, the depth and diversity of Burning Man would be limited. Thus the values expressed in the 10 Principles do in fact come alive at Burning Man. Participation in theme camps is a large part of the direct experience and immediacy of Burning Man because individuals get to meet new people and work on projects with them, building cooperation and solidarity. Chris describes his participation in a theme camp as follows:

I camped with this camp that I had just found, you know, it came through in an email: "The Black Rock Philharmonic is looking for musicians, come play funny music with us". So [my friend and I] signed up with them, it was just a place to camp and a way to participate. The performances that the Black Rock Philharmonic did were just kind of hilarious. We played Bolero and opera, maybe ten of us set up on this stage, you know, it was a lovely sort of communal experience, the performances weren't epic, we didn't have large

³⁴ Burning Man's strong ethos of participation and immediacy has resulted in a rhetoric which separates "participants" and "spectators". Spectators were also referred to as 'tourists' and 'weekend-warriors' by my collaborators. (Weekend-warriors were defined as people who show up to the festival for the final three days; Friday to Sunday. Most participants feel that weekend-warriors do not fully understand or participate in Burning Man culture, at least in part because they do not stay for the entire week in the harsh physical environment of Black Rock City).

audiences, we were just another bizarre, wonderful little thing that if you were walking by at the time you could stop and look at and say “Hey, this is great, there’s a high school band playing Phantom of the Opera”. It was so funny, we had a little bar set up and people could drink. There was also a connection through [the Black Rock Philharmonic guys] to another band which was even more fun, called something like “The Burning Band”, and they were something like a marching band. They were marching around with xylophones, and trumpets and saxophones playing marching band music. So we were with them a little bit, and I remember once we were playing and there was a dust storm and it was just me and a bunch of these guys in the dust storm and I had a cowbell and it was just magical. Imagine we’re this little band and were this group of people who fill up the size of this room and we’re all in this zone together having fun and if you’re twenty feet away you don’t know what’s going on in this circle [because of the dust storm]. You maybe hear some noise but you don’t know what it is. You can’t find them, you can’t see anything. I felt that I was a part of something doing that, which was just nice.

Collective Transgressions

At Burning Man intersubjectivity is usually achieved through art and performance with an emphasis on spontaneity and direct participation. The body is an important element in intersubjective experience because much of communication is enacted physically. As Husserl notes: “It is clear that *the apprehension of the Body* [Leibesauffassung] *plays a*

special role for the intersubjectivity in which all objects are apprehended ‘Objectively’ as things in the one *Objective* time and one *Objective* space of the one Objective world” (1989:86). Inasmuch, intersubjectivity is the source of objectivity and is active in forming world views. This brings us to our second question: What kinds of communication are made possible at Burning Man as a result of its specific intersubjective conditions?

Most communication at Burning Man is achieved through play. The aforementioned costuming, performance art, as well as the surreal landscape provided by the Playa with its large scale sculptures and passing art cars assures that communication between participants is almost always playful. Some of this play is both explicitly and implicitly sexual in nature. There is ample nudity ranging from individuals opting to wander around Burning Man fully or partially naked or sometimes in provocative lingerie, to entire groups organizing nudist activities (like the group of naked cyclists numbering over one hundred individuals that I encountered on my first day on the Playa). In the event guide I received at the entrance to Burning Man there are a range of explicit events listed. Here is a sample:

Tuesday, Friday 2:00 pm – 3:00 pm: **Learn the Erotic Art of Rope Bondage**

An intro to the safe and erotic use of rope bondage. Learn to make a rope shackle, chest harness, corset, and tortoise shell. This is hand on event.

Playfully Yours Edinburgh & 9:00³⁵

³⁵ From the “Burning Man 2010: What Where When” event guide. The first line indicates the day and time of the event and the name of the event in bold, followed by a brief description of the event. The last line indicates the camp name in bold and the address: street name followed by the number (expressed as a position on a clock).

Monday to Last day: **ATTOL's Famous Orgy Dome**

Sexiled? Need a place to get it on? Safe-sex it up on the Playa? A/C, safe-sex space available anytime, day or night! Furnished & supplied.

and then there's only LOVE... Athens & 7:00

Tuesday 9:00 pm – 11:00 pm: **Kink 101 Flogging and Caning**

An introduction to the powerful artistry of flogging & caning. Learn how to bring wonderful sensations with easy-to-make toys. Bring a small towel.

Lazy Lizard Lemonade Lounge Cairo & 9:00

Sexualized play at Burning Man is rich with what Bakhtin referred to as the “material bodily principle, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life” (1984:18). This material bodily principle reflects grotesque realism, in which “the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egoistic form, severed from other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people” (Bakhtin 1984:19). Nudity and sexualized play are also inspired by the neo-tribal aesthetic converging with spontaneous *communitas*. The specific kind of play which is enacted at Burning Man is carnivalesque. Bakhtin’s ideas on the significance of carnival are helpful for understanding intersubjectivity and *communitas* at Burning Man. For Bakhtin “carnival is the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter” (1984:8). This laughter is different than other forms of laughter; carnival laughter is festive - it is the laughter of the people - and thus it is shared. Carnival laughter is also “universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s

participants” (Bakhtin 1984:11). Finally, the laughter of carnival is ambivalent. The purpose of this laughter, according to Bakhtin is to poke fun at systems of domination which are otherwise impenetrable; carnival is an inversion of everyday life which seeks freedom from official norms and values. In our case, Burning Man pokes fun at the rules and rituals of everyday life, choosing instead to flip these on their head by enacting reflexive transgressions. This is very similar to what Turner was indicating when he posited that the liminal phase is accompanied by a “reflection on the meaning of basic cultural values” (1978:34).

The emphasis that Burning Man puts on directly participating, interacting with, and creating the week-long event is different from the surreal encounters described in the previous chapter – social functions, raves, and music festivals – which also provided a liminal environment for my collaborators. This emphasis on direct participation, *enacting* alternatives rather than passively engaging with alternative culture, is one of the distinctions that my collaborators consistently impressed upon me when I attempted to compare their prior neo-tribal experiences to Burning Man. In many cases they told me that this is reflected in the spirit of community and cooperation at Burning Man. Even Jane, who refuses to be labelled a Burner or to consider Burning Man her temporary home, talked about the heightened sense of community at Burning Man:

But one of the things that I really appreciated at Burning Man was if you ever looked like you were stuck, or at all lost, or anything at all, someone would be there to help you out. I was covered in blue [paint], by Wednesday I was painted neck to toe, you know I kept my face not blue, but everything else

was covered in blue and after a couple of days it was just (makes groaning sound), people could tell I was probably really uncomfortable, and so I was getting offers all over the place for showers. So I took this one guy up on his offer, but I had to bring my own water. I'm like; "Okay, sweet". So I got up on Thursday, and I felt all muggy, and I was carrying my water in the hot sun. And so, sure enough, some guy comes along with a bike and he had a little cart and he was just biking around. And he was like; "Oh, I'll help you with that". And, I don't know, at first it was funny how I kind of wanted to resist that too. Why are you helping me? Why are you being so nice? Why is everyone so nice? Stop it! This is not who you really are. I'm sure that you're not like this when you go back to where you live year round. But then at the same time, I was thinking this is really kind, I really do need help (laughs). I really am having a bad time right now, thank you very much.³⁶

Being active in creating art, creating a city, being a citizen; these are all powerful symbolic acts at Burning Man because they are embodied. Embodiment refers to the idea that the body is the intermediary to human consciousness being-in-the-world (Jackson 1996:31). Inasmuch, 'doing' shapes how we make sense of the world as much as, if not more so, than the way 'thinking' shapes how we understand reality. The heightened level of "pARTicipation" and the immediacy of social interactions make this 'doing' all the more resonant for participants. Burning Man is an intersubjective experience where reciprocal relations between individuals and ideas are pervasive. Cam's description of

³⁶ Interview May 10th 2010.

peeling off mental layers at the event, as well as the desire of my collaborators to fully participate at Burning Man reflects their strong intersubjective orientation.

I began this chapter by asking why Burning Man is often described as a liminal experience and how this liminality is experienced. My research indicates that Burning Man reproduces the characteristics of a pilgrimage, making it a consciously engaged liminal experience, where participants are actively seeking a sacred periphery, ontologically different from their everyday lives. Liminality at Burning Man is a carnivalesque experience; the event is characterized by ambiguous reflexive transgressions which invert the moral practices of everyday life. Participants enact social alternatives by embodying the 10 Principles of Burning Man. Inasmuch, participants acquire a practical ritual knowledge of alternative moral practices and aesthetic ideals. Many of the alternative moral practices at Burning Man revolve around grotesque realism and the body. Individuals are temporarily transformed at Burning Man and they become walking-talking actors on a spontaneous surrealist stage. This collective adherence to the common goals of Burning Man manifests a potent intersubjective objectivity (in a particular time and space). In this way, Burning Man fosters a sense of community in the form of a TAZ. Indeed as a ritual journey Burning Man is perhaps the quintessential TAZ experience and blueprint for similar communities since it is a place where people can learn how to create TAZ by ‘doing’. Gilmore notes that “ many individuals cite “community” as one of the key reasons why they go to this festival, and it is also often one of the most pragmatic ways in which individuals take the event home with them” (2005b: 53). Many of my collaborator’s narratives move beyond Burning Man and

illustrate how participants export TAZs to create similar communities through local networks.

5. Transforming Community

Emerging from the ritual inversions and reflexive transgressions which characterize the moral practices at Burning Man, participants return to their everyday lives feeling transformed. This chapter will explore how these transformations are manifested in a commitment to the moral practices of Burning Man through the creation of local community. The discussion will require an examination of the personal and social transformations engendered by Burning Man. Why do Burners actively seek to recreate the moral practices and aesthetic ideals of the event at home? And how do participants translate their ritual journey into community when they return home? I will explore how participation at Burning Man can translate into a moral responsibility toward the aesthetic way of life established through the ritual process. This can be seen in the growth of an official Burning Man diaspora, as well as unaffiliated countercultural community events. Finally I hope to demonstrate how the communities formed through the ritual process undergone by Burners illustrate how the idea of what constitutes community is changing. The practices of community embraced by my collaborators are pragmatic ways of creating continuity in the face of isolation and disjuncture in everyday life.

Personal Transformations

One recurring theme among my collaborators was a strong desire to return to Burning Man after attending the event for their first time. Indeed, the language used by Burners – virgins and veterans - highlights the importance that participants place on continued attendance. Similarly, many expressed a desire to share their Burning Man experiences

with others when they returned home. Here I will argue that these desires underscore a changed status for my collaborators; one which reflects a growing commitment to the moral practices of Burning Man.

Peter

After Peter's first Burning Man in 1999 he was determined to return because "there was so much more to learn and to experience."³⁷ He describes himself as a generally shy and introverted person and he told me it was always difficult for him to meet people. Burning Man has helped him move past this as the relentless extroversion and immediacy at the event made it easier for Peter to engage socially with other people. Peter explains; "that's why I really love Burning Man, it's so easy to just talk to people and hang out with anyone [...] That's really helped me back here [at home] too"³⁸. He has now attended the event five times (his last visit was in 2008) and he has encouraged several of his friends to attend. He facilitated their trip by buying a half-size school bus in 2006 and driving several friends to Burning Man in 2007 and 2008. Peter told me how he originally imagined using the bus to start a theme camp at Burning Man which would offer massages and "chill-out" music. The back of the bus could be converted into a massage room and a shade structure could easily be attached to the frame of the vehicle to house a chill-out area with music. This never ended up materializing because the bus required regular maintenance and Peter was becoming frustrated with the time and money he was spending working on it. Not to mention the cost of driving the bus from Montreal to Nevada was steep, and in order to convert the back of the bus into a massage room Peter

³⁷ Interview November 6th 2010.

³⁸ Interview November 6th 2010.

would have to get rid of most of the seats which could otherwise transport friends willing to share the cost of gas. Ultimately, Peter invested significant resources and time to return to Burning Man and to share his experience with others, some of whom have returned to the event on their own since. He illustrates a common theme among many of my collaborators: after his first Burn he was committed to participating at a higher level in subsequent years, whether this was accomplished by bringing new people to the event or by finding new ways to participate including volunteering at theme camps or even creating new theme camps. Peter's experience also highlights how the event helped him break through his shyness and become something of a leader among the friends he introduced to Burning Man.

Pierre and Cam

Pierre and Cam have continued to attend Burning Man almost regularly since their first Burn in 2003. In the two years since they have returned to Montreal from Seattle they have both changed jobs, bought a house, and had a child. Pierre has continued to attend Burning Man throughout this transition period. In fact since he began attending the festival he has only missed one year when his father was having surgery. Cam took two years off after giving birth but returned in 2010. For both Cam and Pierre the desire to return to the festival is motivated by the personal transformations which the experience engenders. As Pierre explains:

The first year I went to Burning Man I came back and I really wanted to get involved, I was feeling inspired. The second year was a more challenging

year and part of that was working through some of the emotional questions I had, or turmoil, like this thought that if you just went to Burning Man and walked away from it, it was a huge waste. And maybe this is more of a moralistic take on it, but with all the large expensive resources that go in to Burning Man, if all it was was a party in the desert for a week, then fuck that. That wasn't right. So then it was how could I get involved formally either with the organization or with some offshoot? And we have gotten involved with several different theme camps over the years. After the second year, and in subsequent years - maybe not consciously at first - the thirst for change (and I still believe that Burning Man needs to occasion change or at the very least it is a wasted opportunity, but it's probably more than that) became a more personal thing. To be very conscious of who I was at Burning Man because I like that person and it is the person I want to be, and so what is it keeping me from being that person back home? In some ways it's more of a personal transformation than a social transformation.³⁹

While Pierre states that the experience was more of a personal transformation he does admit that he enjoys sharing the experience with others and has in fact “become quite evangelical about Burning Man”⁴⁰. For Pierre, Burning Man makes him a “better person” and his desire to return to Burning Man and to share the experience with others is an effort to learn how to incorporate that person into his everyday life. This reflects a gradual changing of identity whereby the Burning Man participant becomes increasingly

³⁹ Interview February 9th 2011

⁴⁰ Interview February 9th 2011

aware of their engagement with the moral practices they have encountered. Cam explains that Burning Man “renews her faith in humanity and the creativity of the human spirit”⁴¹ which she often finds lacking in her work. She also reflects on her changing status vis-a-vis Burning Man:

Beyond Burning Man we’ve been thinking a lot about how you could create that kind of community [in Montreal], even when Burning Man is not something that is accessible to most people. So how can you recreate that spirit? And what is it about that community that is so appealing? And could you instill that same spirit here through some other avenues? I’d like to think that you can, but I don’t know how yet.⁴²

The powerful experience of *communitas* at Burning Man is also a deeply emotional one; these experiences leave emotional imprints which become a lasting part of lifeworlds and the building blocks of collective identity and community. *Communitas* is accompanied by a realization that participants *belong* to the countercultural aesthetic, and with this realization the seeds of collective identity begin to grow. Indeed there is a strong desire which extends beyond Burning Man as participants who have undergone these personal transformations seek to turn them into social transformation by mobilizing social networks and creating communities around countercultural moral practices. It should be noted that not all Burning Man participants feel transformed by the festival. One of my collaborators, Jane, told me that when her Burn was over she was ready to go home and

⁴¹ Interview February 9th 2011

⁴² Interview February 9th 2011

deal with life. While she generally enjoyed her Burning Man experience she did not see herself returning to the event in the future because “there are other things to do”⁴³. Nevertheless, many of my collaborators have actively sought to recreate the moral practices and aesthetic ideals of the event at home because they have experienced personal transformations and through them, a sense of collective identity and belonging to a countercultural aesthetic.

Social Transformations

How do participants translate their ritual journey into community when they return home from Burning Man? The degree to which individuals feel that they belong to a community is a significant question for my thesis. Amit (2010) states that Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” and Turner’s “communitas”, while signalling a sense of collective belonging, tend to occur in extraordinary circumstances rather than the more commonplace context of everyday life. To examine community in everyday life, Amit suggests we look at sites of strategic ambiguity, namely; affect-belonging, joint commitment, and forms of association. She argues that affect-belonging “is not a question simply of exclusion or inclusion but of how belonging may or may not be recognized, interpreted, responded to and felt” (2010:361). The personal transformations that my collaborators shared with me reflect that many Burning Man participants are often actively interpreting and responding to a sense of belonging. Further, many of my collaborators demonstrated what Amit calls a “joint commitment” to recreating a Burning Man community at home. Amit identifies joint commitment as a strategic site for exploring the idea that community is not cohesive but built on the often conflicting wills

⁴³ Interview May 1st 2010.

of diverse individuals. Unlike other forms of sociation where conflict can be ignored or avoided, joint commitment requires individuals to be interdependent to achieve their common goals. Finally, Amit identifies forms of association as a useful analytical tool for understanding community, which include; duration, scale, mediation, and comprehensiveness (2010:362). In the following section I will describe and examine the Montreal Burners/Brûleurs de Montréal community through these three lenses.

The Montreal Burners

The Montreal Burners are one of many regional Burning Man communities that organize events year round; doing fundraisers for art projects or community organizations, organizing theme camps for next year's burn, and creating local social networks. One of Montreal's two regional leads, Kay, lived in Calgary when he attended his first Burning Man. After his first Burn he began to meet other people in Calgary who had been to the festival. As he recalls, Calgary was one of the birthplaces of the Burning Man regional network:

The very first regional representative person, an official person that was kind of affiliated with Burning Man year round; culture and promotion and stuff, was a guy named Zac Bolan, and he lived in Calgary. So he was the Burning Man representative for Canada living in Calgary, and he had basically created the position for himself and then the Burning Man organization said "That's a great idea", and they started recruiting people in various cities.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Interview March 10th 2011.

Indeed the Burning Man website states that regional contacts emerged in 1997 as the population of Black Rock City began to increase, mostly as a result of internet exposure, and news of the festival spread across North America and eventually across the globe. Initially there were only a handful of regional contacts: Austin, the North Bay (San Francisco), and Calgary, and the formation of regional contacts was an organic process emerging out of the demands of participants. As Bolan stated:

After returning from the Playa in 1997 I felt an intense loneliness caused by my alienation from the people in my community. I began showing slides (of Burning Man) to friends. Soon word got out and I was doing slideshows for friends of friends, (even) out of town. Maid Marian [a Burning Man organizer] asked me if I would be interested in becoming the Regional Contact for Canada shortly thereafter. Acting as a Regional Contact kept me sane during these early days. I was able to form my own support network until a regional community came into being.⁴⁵

Living in Calgary, far removed from the Playa and the San Franciscan artists who first invaded it, Bolan reflects on how *lonely* he feels without his *community*. His sense of belonging and commitment to the moral practices at Burning Man inspired him to create a “community” back home. One of my collaborators, Kay, was part of this early regional community although at the time he was not very active in it, even though he attended Burning Man three times while living in Calgary. However, upon moving to Montreal in

⁴⁵ http://regionals.burningman.com/regionals_history.html Accessed August 14th 2011.

2002, Kay began to seek out the same community and came up with very little. By that time two Montreal regional contacts had been established, Majuna and Mr. Bad, but they were not organizing events regularly. Only two events were held during their time as active leads; both camp-outs in an area of the Laurentians, one which was successful, drawing about one hundred participants, and the second which was rained out. Kay told me how Majuna and Mr. Bad became the first Montreal regional contacts:

Basically they got the job because Mr. Bad kept emailing or calling Larry Harvey (the president of the Burning Man organization) and just complaining about shit, and telling him things that should get changed and what not. And then eventually Larry just said “Fine. Fix it. You’re hired, do stuff in Montreal”⁴⁶

Continuing this tradition of “taking matters into your own hands”, when Majuna and Mr. Bad eventually became too occupied with a blossoming family life and new careers the Montreal Burners began to stagnate. It was then that Kay met up with Science, another veteran Burner, and together they stepped in to take the reins of the Montreal regional group. Even while regional contacts are self-sufficient and self-motivated, the emergence of a “Burners diaspora” is increasingly structured and facilitated by the Burning Man organization. Being recruited as a regional contact is a volunteer position. Nevertheless, regional contacts must familiarize themselves with the 10 Principles, sign a letter of agreement, undergo an interview, and meet the leadership criteria and expectations of Burning Man. These criteria include animating community collaborations through

⁴⁶ Interview March 10th 2011.

conflict management, leadership and organization skills, a passion to speak about Burning Man culture and values, and a desire to integrate local Burning Man communities with social and civic projects.

So what exactly do the Montreal Burners do to mobilize affective social networks? One way the Montreal Burners, under the leadership of Science and Kay, maintains a sense of continuity with Burning Man throughout the year is through their annual decompression event “taBURNak”. Decompression events are done by many regional groups, and serve as a way to transition back to “default reality” after the transcendent reality experienced at Burning Man. They are also a way to raise money, through ticket sales, to support large scale art projects for Burning Man, local art projects, as well as charitable organizations. Most decompression events involve performance art and/or installation art, as well as partying (DJ’s, dancing, drinks, and drugs), and many also include workshops. In 2010, Montreal’s decompression was held at The Tunnel, an “underground” venue in a Griffintown loft⁴⁷. Underground venues are usually cheaper to rent and more flexible on the kinds of activities which might take place. In the case of taBURNak Deux this included fire spinning and an inflatable bouncy-castle in the parking lot of the building. The event began with a potluck dinner and progressed into a full blown party which lasted until six in the morning. Attendees brought alcohol to share at the open bar and a costume trunk was provided at the entrance so participants could dress up in “Playa-gear”, including goggles, flamboyant hats, furry jackets and the like. Kay also attended the Toronto decompression event which was somewhat larger in scale. It started in the early afternoon with workshops ranging from leaderships seminars to

⁴⁷ I use the term “underground” to signify that The Tunnel is not a legal venue, it is a residential loft rented out for parties.

welding training, and then transitioned into a party. As a Montreal regional contact, Kay tries to attend as many decompression events as possible, when I interviewed him he was making plans to go to Delaware for their decompression a month later.

The 2010 Montreal decompression, “taBURNak Deux”⁴⁸, was the second annual Montreal decompression and it demonstrates the slowly growing nature of the Burner community in Montreal as well as the increasing involvement of its members over the past two years. In fact, the event planning committee sent over four hundred emails concerning the planning and debriefing of “taBURNak Deux”. Some of these emails included long debates about how to best reflect Burning Man’s 10 Principles. For example, should performs be paid, or would that be against the “gifting” and “decommodification” principles? After the event comprehensive final reports were made by each committee leader (ticketing, volunteers, etc) and a final financial report of the event was made public to both the Montreal Burners and the Burning Man community at large (through links on the Burning Man Regional Network website).

The decompression event draws Burners and non-Burners alike, it is a festive event which attempts to recreate the liminality experienced at Burning Man. In this sense it is committed to creating an extraordinary space for the spontaneous creation of community through a TAZ. Participants, both organizers and attendees, demonstrate a joint commitment to the Burning Man’s 10 Principles and more generally to an affective immediacy in social interaction. I met many people at taBURNak Deux, some of them shared very personal stories with me and others engaged me in philosophically natured discussions. It was unlike any “party” I had ever attended in Montreal, raves included.

⁴⁸ This is a portmanteau which blends two meanings into one. In this case “burn” is blended with the Québécois swear word “tabarnak”. This playful double meaning also reflects Burning Man’s moral practices of reflexive transgression.

During the event there was a high degree of familiarity in social relations between strangers, perhaps because we knew that we all had a responsibility to participate for the event to be a successful decompression and escape “default time”. Acknowledging and responding to this responsibility is what manifests a sense of (affective) collective belonging. There was also a joint commitment to the moral practices of Burning Man at taBURNak Deux. The event itself required the cooperation and interdependence of many individuals whose diverse expectations and interpretations of Burning Man’s values were debated, often very openly in the planning phase of the event.

The Montreal Burners also organize monthly potluck dinners. I have attended several of these, both organized online via the Montreal Burners email list and several social networking sites. Usually the event date is posted, traditionally the second Tuesday of every month, and everyone in the group “Brûleurs de Montréal” receives an invitation. Where the event will be held is left open to decide, and within a day or two someone has offered up their home (or in one case the home they were house sitting). What is striking about this is that the host will invariably have a handful of strangers over, alongside a small delegation of regulars (whom the host may or may not know depending on the longevity of their membership in the Montreal Burner community). I was surprised to see how many virgins attended these potlucks. Some came to ask questions and get prepared for future burns, others attended specifically to network and get involved with theme camps the following year. The majority of the people at the potlucks I attended didn’t know one another, there were always a few who did know one another, but there were always a handful of seemingly disconnected individuals who simply decided to come by and participate in the potluck.

The first potluck I attended was at Distracto's apartment. Distracto was in his mid-thirties and had been a practicing psychiatrist for two years, having completed twelve years of medical school at McGill. He lived alone in a spacious five-and-a-half in Montreal's Plateau neighbourhood. The potluck went from 7 p.m. until approximately 10:30 p.m. and drew seventeen people; a handful of virgins, many first timers, and a few veterans. Distracto was a first timer and was looking to get involved with the Midnight Poutine theme camp next year, which for the last three years had been run by the veterans in attendance, Kay and Joe. They had decided to abandon Midnight Poutine in 2011 as it required "a ton of work", in order to participate at Burning Man in new ways. Distracto wanted to take over the enterprise and asked the veterans for advice, equipment, and a game plan. Kay and Joe were happy to pass on their knowledge and assured Distracto that he could use their equipment (ranging from deep fryers to potato slicers) if he continued Midnight Poutine. Among the attendees were Cam and Pierre and their little girl. In fact, this is where I first met them, and in light of the personal transformations that they described above, their attendance can be seen as actively trying to establish a social network with a Burning Man community in Montreal, much like the one which Cam describes in Seattle in Chapter 4.

The second potluck I attended was hosted by Doctor Sinful in a home she was house-sitting; it was also on the Plateau and had the same spaciousness as Simon's apartment. Only three other guests had arrived when I showed up and I knew two of them from the Bande de Québécois meeting I had attended a few weeks earlier⁴⁹. It was their

⁴⁹ The Bande de Québécois is a group of about twenty friends living in Montreal who were all planning to go to Burning Man together (and for their first time) in 2011. They initially gave themselves this name with the hope of hosting a theme camp at Burning Man, the name was their group identity. Ultimately only a

first time attending a Montreal Burners event and they had come to network and get advice as they were preparing for their first Burn next year. The third guest was also a virgin, a young man who had come alone and was fairly quiet throughout the evening; he asked the veterans who showed up later a few questions but mostly he listened intently to the conversations around him. Doctor Sinful looked deceptively young, perhaps in her early forties, but when I was chatting with her later in the evening I learned that she had four children, the oldest of which was thirty, she winked. Doctor Sinful was usually based in Toronto but was considering relocating to Montreal for awhile. She was a mobile employee for Microsoft, had lived in three continents, and always worked from home. Doctor Sinful was an active participant in the Toronto Burners community and didn't miss a beat when she came to Montreal; she was even on the planning committee for taBURNak Deux acting as the lead for the committee responsible for organizing volunteers.

Guests continued to arrive slowly until we had reached eleven in all. The table was filled with an array of mostly vegetarian dishes, wine and punch. We made ourselves at home, rummaging through the cupboards for glasses and serving spoons, eventually forming a circle in the living room with plates on our laps, talking with our neighbours. After dinner the conversations got more involved; some people crawled onto the floor around Kay and sat cross legged around him while he answered all their questions. Mika, a Siamese cat, snaked her way through the bodies. Another group stood in the kitchen laughing and talking. Some people pulled out their cell phones and began exchanging contact information, others filled out postcards to the Burning Man organization that Kay

small portion of the group ended up attending Burning Man in 2011. They did not host a theme camp however they did volunteer at other theme camps.

would take to San Francisco for the Regional Summit later in the month⁵⁰. It was a cozy and familiar place to be; I think Doctor Sinful could make anyone feel at home. Most of the people I had met a month earlier at Distracto's potluck were not present; Distracto was however, along with the veterans Kay, Joe and Science, but the majority of attendees were once again new to the Montreal Burners⁵¹.

These descriptions illustrate a different approach to creating community around the countercultural aesthetic. The monthly potlucks are also TAZs, but unlike decompression events which aim at the extraordinary, potlucks aim at creating a TAZ in a relatively ordinary setting. Bey emphasized that the dinner party was a prime site for the TAZ as it utilizes festal social norms (1985). He refers to Stephen Pearl Andrews *The Science of Society* (1851) wherein Andrews states that at the dinner party:

The Individuality of each is fully admitted. Intercourse, therefore, is perfectly free. Conversation is continuous, brilliant, and varied. Groups are formed according to attraction. They are continuously broken up, and re-formed through the operation of the same subtile and all-pervading influence (quoted in Bey 1985:146).

The Montreal Burners potlucks succeed in creating a festal environment that tends to follow the patterns of association described by Andrews. It is, of course, precisely these patterns of association which are most highly valued by the Burning Man community. As

⁵⁰ Regional leads are encouraged but not required to attend the Regional Summit where regional representatives attend workshops and trainings. As Kay worked for an airline company and had some free flights lined up he decided to attend. His girlfriend also lives in San Francisco so he had more than one incentive to make the trip.

⁵¹ Of the four Montreal Burner potlucks which I attended I saw 3 virgins attend more than once.

we saw in the previous chapter, part of what makes Burning Man so significant to participants is the immediacy of social interaction. Similarly, Chen (2005) reported that Burning Man volunteers frequently stated that the opportunity to work with new and diverse individuals on projects was one of their motivations for volunteering. The monthly potlucks dinners offer a regular venue for meeting new people, exchanging ideas, and strengthening joint commitments to new or old projects. Kay believes that the regional Burning Man network is an important part of creating a viable community beyond Burning Man:

What I *am* perpetually interested in, and I will probably continue this forever, is smaller regional events which are popping up all over. There are probably about twenty or thirty regional events across North America and then a few others scattered across the world. I think that's the more important point now. I think Burning Man itself, like the event itself, is going to have to transform into Mecca; it's a place that people go on a pilgrimage to a handful of times but don't necessarily go every year because they can get what they need somewhere else, closer to home. Because it is huge and there is something really awesome about seeing it on that scale, but at the same time it's ridiculous [laughs]. And it's harder to participate in a place that big because you start to get the same feeling that you get when you live in a very big city; that you're such a small voice and how can you be heard, and what kind of contribution can you really make? Whereas when you're at an event with let's say a thousand people, then you think: "Wow, I can really make a difference

here, what I do or don't do can totally shift the balance". So I think that it's more empowering to go to smaller events, people are more likely to *do* stuff.⁵²

Peter's Relaxation Lounge and Distracto's Art Alley

Not all participants who return from Burning Man inspired and ready to take action get involved with Burning Man affiliated groups. Peter, for example, explained how he transformed his Burning Man experience into a project in Montreal called: Relaxation Lounge/Salon de détente. As we saw above, Peter initially wanted to set up a massage and chill-out theme camp at Burning Man but could not put the resources together, so he began an event in Montreal based on the same concept. The event is held once a month in a private loft, it is promoted through networks of friends (most of which participate in Montreal's psytrance scene) on social network sites like Facebook. The aim of the event is to create a unique space where people can relax, meditate, and discuss in an open and accepting setting. The event runs from approximately 10 p.m. to approximately 8 a.m., and there is usually a flexible cover charge to enter the event; either five dollars, by donation, or free depending on the individual's situation. There are DJ's who play chill-out and ambient music throughout the night, there is a massage table where free massages are given (donations are accepted), and several trained masseuses are usually present among the participants of the event. The walls are decorated with large canvases covered with psychedelic imagery and usually participants are allowed to consume cannabis

⁵² Interview March 10th 2011.

inside the event but are required to go outside to smoke cigarettes. The idea is to create a “healthy and safe place [...] for tripping out and exploring consciousness”⁵³.

Peter thinks that his event reflects several of Burning Man’s 10 Principles even though it was never an explicit goal when he started Relaxation Lounge. As he put it: “I wanted to give something back to my [psytrance] community”⁵⁴. Nevertheless, participation, immediacy, and leaving no trace are important aspects of the event according to Peter, and gifting is also encouraged. As Peter put it: “Sometimes a gift is just a hug, a little human warmth”⁵⁵. Relaxation Lounge illustrates a joint commitment to creating spaces that reflect the same broad and often diverse countercultural moral practices as Burning Man. The space is temporary but intense, and the aesthetic resonates with countercultural ideas. Peter admits that his experiences at Burning Man not only transformed him personally but gave him the tools for creating events of his own back home:

I click with Burning Man because it has the same values that I have, it meshes with my way of thinking. Maybe I’ve been influenced by it, it changes your life, it changes something in you, there’s a certain openness and it exposes you to things you wouldn’t see anywhere, and you learn from that.⁵⁶

Distracto, who hosted a Montreal Burners potluck after he returned from his first Burn, became increasingly more engaged in creating continuity with the festival as the months

⁵³ Interview January 18th 2011.

⁵⁴ Interview January 18th 2011.

⁵⁵ Interview January 18th 2011.

⁵⁶ Interview January 18th 2011.

wore on. In the summer of 2011, leading up to his second Burn, Distracto enlisted the support of a few neighbours and converted a small alleyway in Montreal's Plateau neighbourhood into an artistic community space equipped with barbeques, installation art pieces built in the alley, and plants. The alley was open to the public and hosted several community barbeques with an open invitation that went out on social network sites during which people intermingled, shared food and drink, jammed and sung together late into the night. For the summer of 2011 it became a place where people could pass through and feel like they were a part of something different, it was a TAZ in the heart of Montreal⁵⁷.



Figure 10: Plants and graffiti art in the Art Alley. Photograph by author.

Both Peter's Relaxation Lounge and Distracto's Art Alley were temporarily reclaiming spaces and transforming them into communities of practice. The unmediated nature of social interactions at these events, their countercultural aesthetic, and the joint commitment between organizers and attendees to acknowledge and respond to an

⁵⁷ In 2012 the Art Alley was renamed Burners Alley and more installation art was added to the alley, including a sign post with the ten principles on it.

environment of collective belonging shows their commitment to creating community and continuity.

Creating Community

There seems to be extensive evidence that the transformative experience of Burning Man has positive connotations for re-creating community engagement. Most of my collaborators felt personally transformed by the event and several of them went on to proactively re-create some of the moral practices that they embraced at Burning Man (and often before they ever attended the event, in the raves and festivals which started this ritual journey). The development of a Burning Man diaspora itself begs the questions of how and why participants export the festival back home. Indeed, more research is needed on the scope and diversity of the Burning Man diaspora as it continues to grow and events become more pervasive. When we add to this the unaffiliated initiatives which emerge out of participants transformative experience we see that there exists a vast and complex network which often interacts and identifies as a community even though it is often characterized more by difference than sameness. I believe this is a positive response to the disjuncture that is often felt from community in contemporary society. Furthermore, because the moral practices enacted in these TAZs are outside the “normal rules” that individuals face at work and at home, they allow participants to reflexively transgress their own everyday cultural practices and inasmuch contribute to forces of cultural change. These social gatherings may not have the permanence and coherency of traditional representations of community, however, my collaborators consistently described the spectrum of events described above as community spaces. This suggests

that expectations of community may be significantly different in our current sociocultural configurations and that individuals are finding innovative new ways to meet these expectations.

6. Discussion: Community as Social Movement

The personal and social transformations undergone by my participants suggest that individuals find a sense of collective belonging through the ritual process. Pierre and Peter's need to share their Burning Man experiences by recruiting new participants from their circles of friends and co-workers demonstrates the formation of collective identity and the sense of collective belonging participants feel. Another result of the personal and social transformations undergone through this countercultural ritual process is the practice of transient community. Because community for my collaborators is found in TAZs, and TAZs are inherently impermanent, community is reconfigured for many of Burning Man's participants: it is found in-between places, those places when routine is overlooked in favor of spontaneity and immediacy. Indeed, it seems that many of my collaborators began to express their collective identity and community values through the moral practices acquired through their ritual processes.

The moral practices of countercultural ritual experiences are initiations into modes of thought and ways of being. The practical resources gained at Burning Man through enacting alternative models, and the reaffirmation of moral-aesthetic sensibilities found throughout participants ritual journey (i.e.: through the three phases of the ritual process), lend themselves to the formation of new kinds of community orientation and goals. The development of a Burning Man diaspora and local TAZs (from the transcendence of Peter's Relaxation Lounge to the conviviality of monthly Montreal Burner pot lucks) illustrate the ease participants have for moving fluidly in-between these event based activities while simultaneously identifying them as community oriented

organizations. The countercultural identities that my collaborators acquire seem to have an integral role in their collective identity as well. The moral practices of these countercultural spaces reflexively transgress normative modes and give participants a larger sense of commitment, beyond community, to a social movement. Before I elaborate on how countercultural communities, neo-tribes, constitute new social movements I would like to briefly revisit my own ritual process through my Burning Man experience.

My Ritual Process

My initial interest to study Burning Man as a ritual process grew from my own experiences with neo-tribes several years ago; attending raves and festivals and learning through word of mouth about Burning Man. Attending Burning Man as a researcher seemed counterintuitive at times. Several participants who were in my camp and who knew about my project asked me whether I thought that by studying Burning Man I would miss the real experience – the immediacy, the participation. I was definitely concerned about that and when I left Burning Man; I felt happy to be leaving, the week had been a long one, and I was doubting whether I had penetrated any of Burning Man's mystery, whether I had been able to 'let go'. I was confused and overwhelmed by the experience, and I felt like an outsider to the event for the rest of the time I was in San Francisco.

When I got back to Montreal, however, things started to come around slowly. Friends and family would ask me questions about Burning Man and I found myself starting to talk about it like an insider would, I even caught myself defending it on a few

occasions. When the 2011 burn began I found a live video stream to it on the internet and watched Burning Man happen from my living room. I attended Burning Man related events with the Montreal Burners, yet even when my research ended I continued to participate with them. I also began seeing TAZs in more places, and it seemed whenever I found them there were inevitably a few people I had met through the Montreal Burner events at these TAZs.

Two examples come to mind, neither of which has any direct relation to Burning Man, but both managed to organize around similar moral practices. The first is a zombie walk I participated in during the summer of 2011 and the second is the Occupy Montreal camp which set up temporarily in Square Victoria during the fall of 2011. The events could not be more different; at the zombie walk a few hundred people participate in street theatre by dressing up as zombies and shuffling through busy downtown streets groaning and reaching out lifelessly to passersby, while at the Occupy Montreal camp hundreds (if not thousands) of activists took over a public square in solidarity with global social movements addressing an entire spectrum of political, social, economic, environmental, and cultural issues.

I attended both of these events and I found new acquaintances from the Montreal Burner events at both of them. I thought it was strange that in a city with so many things to do, I should run into people from this small community at other events which I was attending for reasons unrelated to my research. I then realized that we were following similar moral practices (reflected in the 10 Principles of Burning Man) through event based TAZs. The zombie walk employed the costuming and radical self-expression of Burning Man, and the communal effort (the horde must stick together and stay in

character). Dressed as zombies we targeted a sidewalk sale on Montreal's prominent Saint-Catherine street. Thousands of shoppers were out on the streets in feverish consumer activity; the zombies had not come to consume but to entertain and distract the shoppers. In this sense, the zombie walk also symbolically reflected the principle of decommodification. Occupy Montreal activists also illustrated decommodification in their camp; the collective kitchen which operated on donations was a perfect example of gifting, and late into the fall the camp was feeding more and more of Montreal's homeless. Occupy Montreal also demonstrated radical inclusion and radical self-reliance, along with participation and immediacy.

Ultimately I realized that I had never really been an outsider to Burning Man, even as a researcher, and my ritual process was complete. I am now interested and participate in many of the moral practices and alternative aesthetics enshrined at Burning Man in the 10 Principles, and when time permits, I find myself discovering and attending more of these countercultural enclaves and sharing them with my friends, and hopefully contributing to some sort of positive cultural change, as indeed I felt I was when I participated in these events.

New Social Movements

New social movement theory emphasizes how collective action is increasingly enacted outside of the political sphere as it attempts to deal with issues of cultural change. According to Alberto Melucci, new social movements "more than others in the past, have shifted towards a non-political terrain: the need for self-realization in everyday life" (1989: 23). Indeed Melucci observes that contemporary social movements are active on

various levels within and outside of the political realm, construct their collective identity outside the political realm, and "translate their action into symbolic challenges that overturn the dominant cultural codes" (1989: 75). This is of course one of the main goals of Burning Man. Furthermore, new forms of community constitute a social movement in the sense that "new social movements are concerned with defence of the 'lifeworld', that is, the sphere of life not governed by instrumental economic concerns but where real debate and communication create normative consensus." (Staggenborg 2008:20). The community engagements we saw in the previous chapter are unquestionably involved in the defence of the lifeworld, a lifeworld which places the alternative moral practices of Burning Man at the center of its cosmology.

Habermas (1987) argues that new social movements are increasingly engaged in creating conditions for "communicative action". Communicative action operates at the level of the lifeworld and is characterized by value-commitments which generate influence; both value-commitments and influence are qualitative media which produce legitimacy. These value-commitments are much like the joint commitments found in contemporary articulations of community. According to Habermas communicative action and the lifeworld it inhabits have been colonized by money and power which represent top down interests and quantitative media. What Habermas stressed however is that quantitative media is dependent upon qualitative media for legitimacy.

In the countercultural TAZs my collaborators and I have explored through our ritual processes the qualitative media and quantitative media are in crisis as the lifeworlds enacted through neo-tribes are no longer legitimizing the normative medias of money and power. While TAZ's become the new organizing principle for countercultural community

practices, the moral practices of Burning Man (seen in the 10 Principles) create new forms of value-commitments and legitimacy. It can, therefore, be argued that Burning Man is part of a larger (new) social movement culture which aims at revitalizing cultural values through the lifeworlds of participants; further, participants engage new social movements by enacting their experiences of the ritual process in communal life.

7. Conclusion

The ritual process began for my collaborators and myself long before any of us had decided to go to Burning Man. For most of us, the ritual process began even before we had heard about Burning Man; it started when we first got the feeling that we were in another cultural world playing by different cultural rules, or as Turner put it, when we became detached from a set of cultural conditions. At raves and music festivals my collaborators experienced a connection and sense of belonging to neo-tribes; affective and passionate group ties which manifest in countercultural enclaves. Neo-tribes are a response to the isolation of individuals and the breakdown of traditional institutions in our current sociocultural configurations. They emphasize social networks over institutions and organize horizontally rather than hierarchically. These initial encounters with alternative aesthetics and new forms of group organization propelled my collaborators to explore the limits of their countercultural commitment to neo-tribes.

The next phase of our ritual process involved a pilgrimage to Burning Man. At the level of the lifeworld pilgrimage is a very powerful and potentially transformative experience. While the liminality characteristic at this stage of the ritual process can be found in a variety of events and experiences, pilgrimage is an enterprise which consciously builds upon the total experiences of the lifeworld in the individual's search for collective belonging and ultimately community. Of course, one's pilgrimage does not have to be to Burning Man, it all depends where the axis mundi lies for participants. In this case, the axis mundi for my collaborators and myself is the Burning Man event, and for many other researchers it has been as well. At Burning Man liminality is experience

in carnivalesque play where participants reflexively transgress the habits and modes of mundane time (everyday life) in favour of more immediate and spontaneous forms of social interaction found in the sacred periphery of Black Rock City. These reflexive transgression are embodied and intersubjective, they become significant moments in the lifeworlds of my collaborators and a blueprint for recreating the magic.

The last phase of the ritual process, reaggregation, sees the initiate transformed in their everyday lives. For all of my collaborators except one (Jane), the feeling of being transformed expressed itself through a commitment to recreating events with the same countercultural aesthetics and values as Burning Man in their everyday lives. Our transformations did not enter every facet of our life; work and leisure still remain separate therefore the disjuncture that my collaborators felt at the outset of their ritual journey has not been forgotten or left behind. Rather my collaborators have minimized the disjuncture in their lives by creating TAZs to fill in the blanks. By sharing Burning Man with friends and creating TAZ events in Montreal my collaborators have demonstrated that many individuals who undergo this ritual process do export their experiences into their local networks and create continuity and community in the face of disjuncture. This is the real power of the countercultural ritual process: it empowers participants to recreate their communities, their values, and their commitments, and ultimately their collective identity.

The growth of a Burning Man diaspora speaks directly to this new form of community organization and collective identity. More research is needed on this diaspora; its depth, spread, and interconnections with other local organizations and groups. For many veterans of Burning Man the local Burner groups are more important to

continuing the growth of this alternative community than attending the Burning Man event. Burning Man itself is giving increasing recognition to the important role played by local Burner groups. As of 2011 Burning Man started a C.O.R.E (Circle Of Regional Effigies) installation. Regional Burner groups create large wooden effigies to bring to Black Rock Desert; the effigies are placed in a circle around the central effigy (The Man) and burned with it at the end of the event. The design, construction, and transportation of regional effigies is entirely in the hands of regional groups. The Montreal Burners are bringing their first regional effigy to Burning Man in 2012.

As the population of Black Rock City continues to grow along with the number of participants getting involved with local groups when they return from their ‘burn’, the Burning Man phenomenon can be likened to a nascent social movement. The goals of this movement are to reinvent the cultural conditions of everyday life so that the disjuncture from community is lessened. The countercultural ritual process transforms what community is and how it is experienced, the ritual process also initiates participants into a sense of collective belonging through reflexive transgressions and provides a model for recreating alternative moral practices in local contexts.

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